Folie à Deux

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Folie à Deux

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Summary

A delayed chance for manipulation on Lecter’s part opens up new opportunities, setting his design for Will Graham on a different but no less twisted path. The reality of a companion sparks a new vision of the future and movement of players on the chessboard. Realising that Will's capacity for love is greater than his capacity for hate, Hannibal would think with humour, is something he will have to live with.

"I don't find you that interesting."

"You will."

Begins in 'Fromage' and, while main events are mostly the same, quite quickly diverges from the canon.

Petit Fours

Chapter Summary

Story title translation: Folie à Deux - "Shared Madness" (or lit. "A Madness/Delusion Shared Between Two People")

Chapter title translation: Petit Fours - 'Apetisers'

Chapter Notes

Because, after surviving Mizumono, I began thinking about whether there was a way Will could have been pulled in tighter to Lecter's plan, and whether, if he was given the chance, he would have stayed or fled. I still haven't made up my mind yet, we'll have to wait and see at the end. This is probably going to be a few stories strung together, feel free to comment, criticise, point out bad spellings or leave a limerick. All are welcome.

Also having recently finished reading 'Red Dragon', the book will feed into Will's character quite heavily too.

At first all he could do was understand his surroundings and how they related to him. It was cold and he was wet, from the snow in his hair and the sweat under his shirt and jacket. The air around him erupted in milky clouds as he walked along the street, away from his hastily parked car, under the sallow glow of the street lamps. The condensation fell against his cheeks as he hurried through it. His legs felt oddly weak as he ascended the stairs and his fingers were numb when he reached out to press the doorbell. The action seemed like a formality or a practiced movement, considering he simply entered without waiting. He found himself subconsciously jiggling on his feet as he walked back and forth to keep the blood flowing in his body, keep his temperature up, removing his damp coat and barely noticing the warmth of the indoors as he waited. He was so busy focusing on not thinking about the problem that it was almost a surprise to him when the man he'd summoned walked around the corner. By the look on Dr. Lecter's face Will wasn't the only one feeling surprise.

"I kissed Alana Bloom," he said as if it were a perfect explanation as he walked inside, Lecter standing back to allow him entrance, patting down his coat with a strict and violent motion before throwing it onto a nearby chair; it seemed pointless to feel the small start of embarrassment that had welled up as the cold had melted away, realising that he had essentially barged in uninvited. As such, he continued inside and swallowed down the feeling, replacing it with purpose.

“Well,” he heard Lecter say from behind him as he kept walking, “come in.”

The words would have to offer the small consolation that Will was beginning to think he didn’t deserve from Hannibal Lecter. He took it nonetheless. On entering the dining room Will’s bare forearms prickled at the cold he had only just escaped. He looked at the open patio door and it at once confused and irritated him. The small patch of guilt, almost subsumed by his rising need to talk to a friend, just talk, was spilt again.

“You have a guest?” he asked, hoping the answer would be no.

“Colleague,” Lecter corrected him, walking forwards to close the door smartly but with no real hurry, “you just missed him.”

The words didn’t seem to offer much of an excuse for Will’s actions, but the guilt was drying up as the familiar setting calmed him and his need was greater, as far as he was concerned in that moment, than Hannibal Lecter’s dislike of rudeness, “Didn’t finish his dinner,” Will observed, mainly just for something to say.

“An urgent call of some sort,” Lecter continued to explain, smoothing down his well fit suit as he turned back to face him, “he had to leave suddenly.” He spared Will a short glance before walking along the other side of the table, the soft light of the dining room setting him in an oddly harsh glow, “this benefits you, because I have desert for two.”

There had been a sudden need to decline the offer, so much so that he even opened his mouth; ‘*I don’t like desert*’ he would have said, if he hadn’t felt it would only compound his rudeness to do so. You’re already barging in on his evening, he thought, and the interrupted host only offers consolation. Will closed his mouth and smiled in a not wholly constructive manner as he followed the man to the kitchen. His thoughts were beginning to sound an awful lot like Lecter’s words these days. It was an oddly comforting thought to cling to as his mind raced, something substantial and anchoring; ‘bedrock’ as Jack Crawford put it.

Will walked into the kitchen with his arms folded and the rich smell of sweetness pouring from the open, humming oven as a dish of two exquisitely formed puddings of some sort (Will would never pretend to be as knowledgeable about food as Lecter was) were removed.

“Tell,” Lecter said clinically as he placed the puddings onto the counter, “what was Alana’s reaction?”

Will sighed as he spoke, knowing that even as he said the words “That she wouldn’t be good for me and I wouldn’t be good for her,” that Lecter was probably expecting them. Will had expected them when Alana said them in his small living room next to the hole he’d dug into the wall, the hole that only seemed like a realisation of his mental state more than a real need to find the imaginary animal hiding there. He hadn’t been surprised by her reaction to his kissing her, only more confused as to why she had let him in the first place.

“I don’t disagree,” Lecter said as he plated up the delicacies, entirely focused on keeping the unstable puddings upright as he transferred them to two already embellished plates, “she would have an obligation to her field of study to observe you, and you would resent her for it.”

“I know,” Will said with an oddly accepting tone of defeat, shrugging his shoulders lightly.

“Wondering then,” Lecter continued without missing a beat, momentarily breaking his concentration on the pudding in order to glance at Will; the same focus was still there, however, and Will felt the need to cover his reaction to that sharpness by looking away, “why you kissed her, and felt compelled to drive an hour in the snow to tell me about it.”

It was only as he stood there, watching Lecter close the oven and open the fridge, that he realised he’d never even asked himself that question. He’d been allowing the other, *why did you kiss her, why did you, why did she let you, why*, to roll around in his head over and over as he’d pressed his foot to the accelerator just enough and yet not too much to allow the car to slip on the impacted snow. Why I’m here is not important right now, Will told himself, anyway I don’t have that many friends to turn to. Another thought he didn’t wish to dwell on.

“Well, I wanted to kiss her since I met her,” Will said, feeling the truth spill off of him like a weight from his shoulders, “she’s very kissable.”

He felt his lips turn up into a smile at his own words, unable to stop himself. The bright light from the fridge silhouetted Lecter’s face until he closed it, allowing Will to see a returned smile upon normally stoic lips. It always felt like a triumph of sorts for Will, mainly subconscious, when Lecter smiled, he did it so rarely. Will tried to read the link between his curved lips and his eyes but the connection seemed broken somehow. Lips said one thing, eyes said another, but Will couldn’t truly put the two together, like puzzle pieces that refused to fit. He shook the thought off. Can’t turn it off for a second, can you, he thought, stop reading your friends and just listen.

“You waited a long time,” Lecter said, scooping something white and creamy from a bowl in his hand onto the plates, “which suggests you were kissing her for a reason, in addition to wanting to.”

Could he truly blame himself for reading Lecter when Lecter was obviously reading him like an open book? Will was tempted to clam up, tempted to lie, divert, hide, but in truth he knew that it wouldn’t make any difference. Lecter had already sensed something underlying and it would be foolish to try and subvert him. The man was too clever for that, Will knew by experience. He licked his lips and knew that his expression was giving him away from the small glint in Lecter’s eyes as he continued to prepare the food; the same triumph Will knew he felt when he knew he had influenced the man in some way.

“I heard an animal trapped in my chimney,” he said, afraid of his own words; he stumbled over completing the sentence, unable to stop the vulnerability seeping out, “uhm, broke through the wall to get it out, didn’t find anything inside. Alana showed up, she looked at me...maybe her face changed, I don’t know but she knew,” take a breath, tell him, just tell him; *understand me*, his words pleaded, *help me*.

“Knew what, Will?” Lecter kept his focus on his task, his tone even and professional, something that made Will feel simultaneously uncomfortable and safe. There was an odd pitch in his stomach at the sound but Will fought it down as nerves, as fear of saying the words aloud. Saying them made them true.

“There was no animal in the chimney,” he said slowly, feeling as if the words were being forced from his mouth, “it was only in my head.”

His mind felt like the flakes of chocolate that Lecter was lovingly placing atop his desert; shredded and liable to melt at the slightest pressure. He found he had unconsciously shoved his hands into his pockets to keep them from shaking. The reflective surfaces of the kitchen were bright and clean, sharp lines and angles, perfect delineations between their respective realities. In opposition to that mocking display Will felt as if all his realities were blurring together, like running water seeping into a stream that ran into a river that flowed into the ocean. Where did one end and the other begin? He thought he heard the tap, tap, tap of dripping water as he walked but knew, he knew somewhere in his mind, that it was only his shoes against the floor as he slowly approached the counter where Lecter stirred a dark sauce with a large spoon.

“I sleepwalk, I get headaches, I am hearing things,” he said. *Drip drip drip*, the sound spoke to him and Will did his best to ignore it, knowing that it made him feel as if he were about to break down, unsure when the sound had even started or if it had always been there, *rush rush rush*. He looked obsessively at the clock on the wall to check the time, “I feel unstable.”

“That’s why you kissed her?” Lecter asked, hauling Will back to the reality in which he stood, here in the kitchen. The effect was nauseating but Will shook it off even as he reeled from it. What is wrong with me, what is wrong with me, “a clutch for balance?”

Will shut his lips into a tight line and felt resentment at his obviousness. He sees everything because you want to show it to him or because he wants to get it out of you? he wondered of Lecter even as he tried to avoid the thought. When did this become about him? Will hated to ask himself, “You said yourself, what you do is not good for you,” Lecter continued.

“Unfortunately,” Will said as if in defeat, as he steered himself away from his own thoughts, “I am good for it.”

The clink of the spoon against the bowl seemed to ring in his ears. He watched the syrupy substance spill out onto the plate at Lecter’s action, dribbling the substance artistically and yet with purpose along the side of the dish. I felt fine on my way here, Will tried to rationalise to himself even though he knew it was futile, I felt fine in the car, what’s happening to me, why now, why this? He took the plate when it was offered to him but put it back down onto the counter almost immediately. His face felt itchy, hot; he brought his hands up to rub at his cheeks, his eyes, trying to brush the feelings away. He was only dully aware of a voice underneath the scratching sound of the rough skin on his hands against the stubble on his face, louder and louder as everything else seemed drowned.

Drip, drop, rush.

“Will, can you hear me?”

He started in surprise as he felt a hand on his shoulder, jerking away from the contact, his hands falling down from his eyes to reveal Lecter standing next to him, hand still half raised from where it had previously rested on his shoulder. Will swallowed, eyes darting around the

kitchen, falling inevitably on the clock to check the time. Nothing lost, he thought as he forced himself not to panic, nothing lost.

“I think you might need to sit down,” Lecter suggested, his movement slow as he once more touched Will, placing his hand gently against the side of his arm and applying the smallest amount of pressure, “perhaps a small brandy would suffice rather than desert.”

“No, no,” Will shook his head and smiled, this one less genuine than the last, feeling suddenly exposed, “I can’t, I still have to drive home.”

“In my opinion that would be a foolish decision,” Lecter said, tipping his head and pursing his full lips, “you appear to be in a highly emotional state, you have said yourself that you feel unstable and the weather is not suitable for driving.”

“I got here without crashing, didn’t I?” Will knew his tone was defensive and for the life of him he couldn’t understand why.

“Yes, you did,” Lecter agreed in a calm, supportive voice, “but that does not mean you will return home in the same fashion.” His gaze appeared to soften momentarily, the smallest glimpse of something beyond the professional shell, or the friendly mask that Lecter normally wore around him, “please, it would give me great peace of mind if you were to wait until morning.”

Something about Lecter’s use of the adverb made Will question whether he was asking or demanding. *Please*. Everything the man did he did with purpose, Will thought, but for a moment he couldn’t tell what that purpose was. Will shook his head and sighed, a rickety sound that stuttered out of his throat. It took a lot of convincing himself that this wasn’t a bad idea in order to finally nod his head at his host, trying to keep the anxiousness to a minimum. Will hated that Lecter’s words were right, that the concern he showed for Will only compounded the concern Will showed for himself.

“Thank you,” Lecter said softly, the ignominious smile once more on his face; this time it reached his eyes, and Will wasn’t sure what that meant, if anything. Trying to read Lecter was like trying to read a code with only half the cipher, all small movements of his face, eyes, hands, seemed to signal individual traits that Will was still trying to unravel.

Through his scrambled, racing mind Will tried his best to go against his nature and not read the man at all. *You need to relax*, he thought he heard Jack’s voice in his thoughts again and the lines seemed to blur and mix until he wasn’t sure who was in his head anymore. He allowed himself to be led without conscious nature of where he was going, until he felt himself lowered into an exceptionally comfortable armchair facing a lambent fire. He watched the flames, feeling twitchy at their constantly changing form. They seemed trapped within the fireplace, neither too grand nor too understated, definitely pale marble but elegantly chiselled, small flourishes followed by solid angular lines that echoed outwards into the room. Will spared his surroundings a quick glance, taking in rich vermillion on the walls, compounded by further dark chocolate brown in the curtains and heavy mahogany wood furniture. He felt as if he were in a time out of time, somewhere else other than Baltimore, other than where he felt like a trapped animal in a wall clawing to get out.

Somehow it disturbed him how safe Lecter made him feel, he thought as he watched the man in question pour amber liquid into a heavy, cut crystal tumbler from an ornate bottle. The glass was delivered to him and he took it with a soft ‘thank you’. Lecter sat in the mirroring armchair next to his own, relaxing back into the chair and crossing his legs. The firelight cast odd shadows onto his face, flickering, and bizarre shadows appeared to extend out onto the armchair’s back from the man’s finely parted hair. Will took a large sip of the drink in his hand without even sniffing it. It turned out not to be brandy, as advertised, but instead a whiskey, a smooth and heady variety which warmed as it sank down into his body and left a wonderfully tangy taste on his tongue, perfuming his mouth with the fumes. He let out a short cough and sniffed.

“No need to splash out the expensive stuff on me,” he tried to joke, knowing it wasn’t much of one, “I don’t exactly have much of a palate.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not true,” Lecter said as he swirled his own drink in a large snifter glass; assuredly brandy, Lecter would never be so crass as to drink out of the wrong glass, “most people who believe they have no palate for the finer things do not realise that their likes and dislikes make up said palate. You could tell it was expensive. Do you like it?”

“Yes,” Will said, sinking back into his chair, feeling slightly awkward; it was at that moment that he realised he’d never truly had a conversation with Lecter outwith their unofficial sessions, talking about cases and the odd few sentences here and there where they had shared some odd moment of connection that was always swiftly cut off. He sniffed again and played with his glass, sliding his fingers over the sharp angles and feeling the hard edges with his fingertips.

“Then you underestimate your own potential,” Lecter continued, looking away from Will into the fire, “something I have noticed in you since we met.”

“Is that right,” Will said wryly, “I’m more than privy to my own failings Dr. Lecter, and I’m quite sure that underestimating myself isn’t one of them.”

“Then we are in disagreement,” Lecter said in an offhand manner which only made it sound as if Will was most certainly wrong even without saying it, “and please, Will, I’m quite sure we have been acquainted for long enough to be on a first name basis, don’t you?”

“I, yes, I mean...” Will stopped himself from continuing in his flustered speech; there was a scratching at the back of his mind that was making itself felt as he watched the flickering light of the fireplace dance across Lecter’s face. Every spark of light seemed to assault his eyes. He blinked rapidly and looked away, “sorry, I didn’t mean to offend. Guess I just got into the habit.”

“None taken,” Lecter inclined his head before raising it once more and taking a long, appreciative sip of his brandy. They sat in silence, thankfully absent of unease, while the wood in the fire popped and cracked. Will took another long drink of his whiskey and blinked his eyes. It wasn’t that he was unused to alcohol, but the drink was strong and he'd had little to eat all day; it made his limbs feel heavy. Against his better nature Will appreciated the feeling. The tension that normally accompanied thoughts of falling asleep was absent from his body, dulled by the heady scent of whiskey in his blood. He didn’t like to use substances

to impair his senses, too lax, too risky, but at that moment, it felt necessary. Considering his building neuroses and inability to understand who was looking back at him from the mirror, the prospect of simply not caring for a few hours seemed like sheer bliss. He looked to his left and saw that the snow was once more falling past the window through a gap in the curtains.

“So, if you are attracted to Alana Bloom,” Lecter said suddenly, forcing Will to take stock of the situation he was happily melting into, “why take so long to confess your attraction?”

“Uh, well, she’s attractive, yes,” Will said, feeling as if he had been ambushed even though he’d initially come to talk on that very subject, “but she’s a little unapproachable at times, I mean she occasionally can’t help treating me like a patient.”

“Does that bother you?” Lecter asked, seeming to instantly change the subject once again, forcing Will to keep up even through his fogged mind; at least he felt more comfortable in this, the usual psychological patter Lecter used between them, “That all of your friends tend to psychoanalyse you?”

“Not all my friends psychoanalyse me,” Will said with a shrug and a smile, “the dogs haven’t started yet anyway.”

“Ah yes,” Lecter said with a smile of his own, which was a fleeting as the flames in the fire, “unconditional love. The relationship between a dog and its owner does have certain benefits over human interactions.”

“Every time I sleepwalk I wake up to find Winston there, watching over me,” again he’d moved back to the truly personal, licking his lips and taking another drink to stave off the intimate feeling, “looking after me. Seems sad, doesn’t it, that the only true friendship I can claim is with a stray dog?”

“He is no longer stray if you are there to look after him,” Lecter rationalised, placing his drink down onto a nearby occasional table. The man seemed to take a moment to think before continuing, watching Will closely as he spoke, “and I feel that it is not too much of an assumption to consider that my own friendship might be important to you.”

The sleep in his mind, the eclectic light of the dancing fire and the whiskey in his system all made it difficult to process the conversation. Will floundered, opening his mouth once, twice, before finally finding any words. This evening was turning out to be inappreciably unpredictable, especially considering Will’s unstable mental state.

“I didn’t mean...” he stopped, feeling the words were wrong; he started again, clearing his throat before speaking, “sorry. I feel like all I’ve done tonight is turn up at your house and insult you.”

“Not at all,” Lecter shook his head delicately, “that you came here in the first place is more than enough for me to understand that you consider me a friend, Will. I just hoped you had made the connection yourself.”

He bit the inside of his cheek and dragged the flesh through his teeth. It would be nice to have anything go well tonight, wouldn't it? he thought. He blinked again, finding it increasingly difficult to reopen his eyes once he had shut them. He sat in the chair, sunken into its confines, trying to think of a way to apologise, to say that he did consider him a friend, but nothing was forthcoming. It was after an indeterminate amount of time Will realised his world had gone black.

"You look tired, Will," he jumped, opening eyes that he didn't remember closing, looking to his right and blinking slowly, watching Lecter sit forwards and cradle his glass in both hands, "I have a spare room but the bed has not been made. Please wait here while I make it up for you."

"You don't have to," Will tried to counter, "I'll just sleep on the couch. Toss a blanket over me, I'm not fussy where I sleep."

"I would not hear of it," Lecter said, the minor change in his voice and stance almost transmitting the outrage that such a lack of courtesy to a guest brought out in him.

Lecter left the room softly, his movements purposeful and elegant as always. Will found himself staring at the empty chair left behind, the striped material, cream and then blue and then cream, leaving a space where Will's mind told him there should not be a space. Why did you take so long to tell Alana how you felt? he asked himself again and again, the question coming full circle in his mind. You've known her for a long time, she's your friend, you should be able to tell her without fearing her reaction, thinking she's judging you, but...

Her emotions become my emotions, he thought, and she's so close to everything I'm scared of that it just reflects back onto me. I need to be practical about this, not emotional. The more he tried to tell himself what he should do, the more he resented it. Why did I come here? he thought, wishing he was at home while also fearing the bed he slept in for the nightmares it brought.

The next thing he knew there was a soft touch against his face and he once more jerked awake, unable to recall having drifted off. The fire was still burning but appeared far lower than when he had last caught sight of it. He looked up blearily to find Lecter standing above him, surveying him.

"It will do you no good to sleep here," he said, "come, I have made your bed."

Walking was slightly difficult, more so than it should have been. Will found himself bumping against cabinets and tables as he followed Lecter through to the main staircase and up to the second floor. The house was mainly dark and Will felt it as an oppressive atmosphere, crowding in around him. There were things in his darkness that he didn't want to see. Instead he kept his tired eyes on the Lecter's well tailored back and followed him up the stairs towards a well lit hallway decked in a creamy yellow. There were two cabinets lining the walls, small curios atop their well polished surfaces, and well positioned paintings that Will didn't have the wherewithal to investigate. Lecter turned into the second door on the right, leaving two doors in the corridor unaccounted for, and held the door open for Will to pass inside.

“I am sure my nightclothes will not be the best fit,” he said as Will took in the stylish room; large double bed with brocaded runner of chartreuse over an olive green bedspread, cream walls, a large ornate wardrobe and a twisting light fixture which made Will squint; Will turned to face the man and found himself being handed a neatly folded bundle of material, “but I think they will suffice.”

“Thank you,” he said automatically, forcing himself to qualify it further as Lecter looked at him curiously, “for all of this, everything I mean...thank you.”

“You are most welcome,” Lecter said, “if you wake before I do, feel free to help yourself to anything in the kitchen. The bathroom is the first door on the right.”

He left with an enigmatic look on his face that Will didn’t have the wherewithal to analyse, catalogue or understand. Instead he spent an immeasurable amount of time getting out of his clothes and into the provided pyjamas which, only when he put them on, did he realise were silk. Lecter had been right, they were a little too baggy on his lithe frame, but they were comfortable and, at that moment, that was all he cared about. Will crawled under the heavy covers of the cold bed and didn’t appreciate the odd silence of the room. Normally he fell asleep in a room full of warm bodies, snuffling in their sleep as they dreamed of chasing rabbits and swimming in the river. Here the environment seemed sterile by comparison, a room never used if the thin layer of dust on the dressing table was anything to go by. Lecter did not appear to tolerate dust in any of the other rooms, yet this one seemed more for show than actual use. Will wasn’t sure if he should feel privileged or sad at that realisation.

Seems I’m not the only one with a lack of faith in friends, he thought as his eyes closed against the soft glow of the lamp. His heart beat slowly in his chest, thumping against the confines of his body and the heavy bedclothes.

It was with an odd but ineluctable feeling of emptiness that he opened his eyes again and found the room dark.

When did I turn off the light? he asked himself, even as he knew it was a futile question. The air felt heavy, syrupy, like the dark sauce poured from a spoon, drizzled over his body. He fought to lift his arms, the action seeming extended over an uncertain period of time. Soft cloth against insistent hands. Considering he knew his duvet to be light he was confused as to why he was finding it so difficult to get out of bed. When he looked around for the clock, that familiar bright blue digital readout, he found nothing but an unfamiliar bedside table. Looking up gave him an unfamiliar ceiling and, for a moment, he panicked.

He forced his way out of the bed, his movements heavy and slightly fumbling. He could not feel the cold against his skin. The sound of the room seemed to come to life, breaking out of its quiet at the familiar *clip, clip, clip* of hooves against wood. Will turned his head to the now open bedroom door and watched the stag, its raven fur barely discernible in the gloom, walk past. There was no question but to follow. His bare feet shuffled across the floorboards, leading him out into the corridor. The yellow seemed grey in the dark, all cheer gone. The paintings shone out dreary faces, sketched as if in repose. He followed the sound of the stag

even as it led him down the staircase and out into the dining room, the organic curves of the walls and the dark indigo blue seeming like the ocean at night. The stag stood in the centre, where Will was sure there should be a table. Instead the animal turned and looked at him, like a centrepiece, as if to show what was hanging there. A spotlight that drew his eyes, making the rest of the room fade into a void.

Will didn't want to see the grinning, lifeless, milky eyed corpse of Garett Jacob Hobbs but once he found himself staring it was impossible to imagine looking anywhere else. The man grinned at him even as his insides sat open to the air, around him in a gruesome display, set upon a circle of plates like appetisers. *See?* The man's dead voice hissed, *You see*. He stared and stared until the air around him seemed to vibrate, watched in detached horror and a niggling sense of conviction, as the stag came to stand beside him, its presence warm but dangerous, and Hobbs' already mutilated corpse was pierced by fine, white points turned red as they continued through his rotted flesh, branching out like a grotesque tree until his body opened up further in rivers of blood.

Drip, drip, drip, he heard, *rush, rush, rush*. A high pitched sound invaded his ears, building slowly, whirring and fading, whirring and fading. Will felt as if his tongue was swollen in his mouth and he could not call out. His arms and legs would not move. With a sense of all encompassing fear and anxiety he turned his head to the right and looked at the stag, its great, round, black eye staring back at him. Will breathed in tightly as he saw himself reflected there, saw himself in the thing which he feared the most and yet longed for. For a moment of terse calm Will Graham felt awash with recognition. *Will*, he heard, he swore he heard, *Will*.

"Will," the voice became real, the surroundings became real, the air lifted into his lungs in a start of clear breath and Will found himself viewing the stag's clear stare in the dark one moment and then Hannibal Lecter's bright face in the light the next. He blinked rapidly and brought his arms up to coil around his torso, swallowing down the fear and trying to place himself in the reality of his situation. He looked around, taking in the now bright dining room, the lack of the corpse, the lack of blood and the lack of the interminable dripping. He found himself looking back to Lecter and licking his lips self consciously. The man simply watched him carefully, "yes, you are awake. At least, this time, your feet did not take you too far."

"I'm," he hesitated; rarely had his erratic sleepwalking inconvenienced anyone and he was always happier when there was no one there to witness his insanity except the dogs who wouldn't judge him for it, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"Of course you didn't," Lecter said, placing his arm around his shoulders, something Will didn't feel entirely comfortable with in his conscious state that was so close to bleeding into his nightmares; he thought he could smell the heady scent of fur and the delicate brush of feathers against his neck. No, no, he said to himself as he was led back towards the stairs, this is real. He shivered, wanting nothing more than to escape the firm grasp on his person, leave the house and go home. The room was light again when he re-entered, the lamp never having been switched off as far as he could understand it. "Would you prefer something to help you sleep?" Lecter asked as he watched Will stand awkwardly next to the bed.

“No,” Will said plainly, a slightly incredulous tone to his voice, “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“You are probably correct,” Lecter said, not leaving the room as he continued to stand in a middling sense of space between the doorway and the bed, “then I will simply keep an ear out, as they say, in case you decide to continue your nightly wanderings.”

No more came, even if the nightmares didn’t cease. He was as used to them now as he was to feeling the sunshine in his eyes in the morning. Didn’t make it pleasant or good for his health, but at least it was reliable. One of the few things he could rely on.

When he finally woke in the morning at a more reasonable time, eight forty by his watch, he set about putting on all the clothes he could find, folding his borrowed pyjamas as best he could and trying to make the bed look neat. It still seemed dishevelled amidst the confines of the orderly room, but Will would have to settle for that disparateness in he and Lecter’s dispositions. He wandered out into the house, seeming yet another world when lit by sunshine filtered through glass, and descended the stairs once more. The smell of bacon and warm dough sprang to his nose as he reached the ground floor, leading him forwards through the house like a cat to catnip. On entering the kitchen the scene appeared too homely for him at first, an odd setting with the kitchen as seemingly more than just a functional room as Lecter, not looking up from his task of taking two neat rows of bacon from under a slow grill, dressed in a heavy, dark, green and blue dressing gown, expertly tied and worn as if it were an everyday suit, had not yet brushed his hair and appeared to be lost in his own thoughts. Will cleared his throat politely and smiled as Lecter looked up, his gaze unsurprised, making Will feel a little foolish for thinking the man did not know he was there.

“Good morning,” Lecter said succinctly, using a pair of silver tongs to transfer the bacon from the grill onto two plates already sporting poached eggs atop a bed of what looked like spinach, a small square of black pudding, a slice of toasted seed bread and three thin slices of what appeared to be a dark red fruit, “I assume you are hungry, considering you appeared to have had no dinner last night.”

“Uh, yeah,” Will scratched the back of his neck and drew in a deep breath, “I suppose I wasn’t in the best frame of mind. Thanks,” he added as Lecter handed him the beautiful plate and watched him for a second too long.

Will followed as Lecter led him through to the dining room, already laid out for two, and sat himself at the head of the table. Will took the seat to Lecter’s left, glad for the sunshine that streamed in through the patio doors and seemed to chase the dark shadows from his mind. Lecter poured him a glass of orange juice from a large jug as he sat. Will picked up his knife and fork, cutting a strip of thin bacon in half and eating it. The flavour was exquisite, as was everything Lecter cooked, tangy and yet mild, with an indiscernible flavour he couldn’t quite place. He knew Lecter was watching him, the man always did seem expectant of his guests’ reactions to his cooking. Will couldn’t say anything less than...

“It’s delicious,” he said in the usual monotone he reserved for compliments, “thank you.”

“Protein is the best way to begin one’s day,” Lecter said, spearing a range of ingredients from the plate onto his fork before following suit; he appeared to savour the taste as Will had done, a small smile quirking his lips momentarily, “or so I have been told.”

Will couldn’t fault it, even if he would still insist he had no cultivated palate. The black pudding, something he didn’t often get to enjoy, was crisp on the outside and soft on the inside, pungent, savoury and exceedingly fresh. The fruit, a blood orange if Will wasn’t mistaken, mixed a tangy sweetness to the dish which complemented the savoury bacon, the perfumed pudding and the creamy egg. It wasn’t often Will allowed himself to be impressed, but Lecter’s cooking always ended with satisfaction. They ate in relative silence, Will trying to force his mind back to the case at hand and Lecter enigmatically quiet, as usual.

“I’d better get home and then head to the office and report in with Jack,” Will said as he retrieved his jacket; putting on the padded item of clothing made him feel safer if nothing else, “the dogs are going to be hungry.”

“Will,” Lecter’s tone stopped him more than the use of his name did; it was, dare he say it, hesitant, something he didn’t hear often, if at all, from the man. Will looked at Lecter through the shield of his glasses which he had retrieved from his coat pocket, frowning slightly, “there is something I want to tell you, something which borders on breaking my patient doctor confidentiality in order to do so,” Will nodded jerkily, feeling the odd, safe vibe he had become accustomed to invaded by this darker, sour note; he reached under his glasses with thumb and index finger to rub at the bridge of his nose, “one of my patients believes a friend of his may be involved with the killings at the symphony.”

“You’re bringing this up now,” Will couldn’t help but say, almost as if he were speaking to himself.

“Actually, I did try to tell you last night,” Lecter said, tipping his head down and to the right, as if creating a softly spoken, private space in which to articulate his words despite their being perfectly alone, “but you appeared not to hear me. Considering your state I surmised there was no benefit to informing you at the time, that it would be more prudent to wait until you felt more yourself.”

There was nothing Will could say to that beneath the sting of guilt Lecter’s admission brought. If you were more stable, it taunted him, if you were more sane. If what? Will wanted to fight back, but he already knew the answer to the questions in his own head. More people saved, less people dead. It seemed very cut and dry. *Not a real FBI agent*, the voice taunted, *didn’t pass the screening*. It held a mocking lilt. Will let out a snorted breath. The last person he needed in his head right now was Freddie Lounds.

“I have to admit that my patient appeared genuinely worried when he reported this to me,” Lecter said, a slight frown on his forehead, “it seemed he feared for his own safety, not just that of others, as if he would be next on the list. This friend, he runs a music shop in Baltimore. I thought it might be worth your while to interview him.”

“Yes,” Will said before a long drawn in breath, “yes it would. Give me his details and I’ll speak to Jack.”

“Of course,” Lecter said, turning away to walk back into the house, returning with a small, leather bound notebook; he unfastened the elastic strap holding it closed and produced a business card:

CHORDOPHONE STRING SHOP
72 West Mount Vernon Place
Baltimore, MARYLAND

Finest handmade string instruments, restoration
and restringing; lessons also available

Will turned the card over to be faced with a very Dickensian name if ever he saw one. *TOBIAS BUDGE*, in cursive black print, with a phone number beneath. He turned the card over once more, rereading the front.

“He plays?” Will asked, his mind already waking up as he felt the card between his fingers, thick and heavy duty, trying to gain a handle on the man he was now looking at through the details.

“Cello,” Lecter said significantly.

“If your patient tells you anything further about his friend...” Will started.

“I understand the procedure of psychiatric conduct, Mr. Graham,” Lecter said with a purse to his lips but a humorous glint to his eyes, “he comes in later today, I will inform you of any new intelligence.”

“What happened to the first name basis?” Will joined in on the joke; Lecter merely smiled, arousing a small glint of triumph in Will as it always did.

He put the card into his pocket, looking off into the middle distance. It was a lead if nothing else, which was all that they had so far in the case other than Will’s own perception of the killer’s mind and a badly mutilated corpse. Will was so momentarily focused that he didn’t see the hand reach up to his forehead until the cool skin touched his heated flesh. He surprised himself by not starting in surprise or backing away from the contact. He blinked and looked at Lecter as the man observed him through narrowed eyes.

“Are you sure you are alright?” Lecter asked, “Your temperature is still high.”

“I tend to run hot,” Will smiled self effacingly, as he turned to leave, “it’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Do take better care of yourself, Will,” Lecter said as Will opened the door, “your friends will worry about you.”

Will let out a small laugh because he had no idea what else to say to the very out of place statement from Lecter. He closed the door behind him and frowned all the way to his car. He pulled out his phone and dialed as he buckled himself into the seat, turning on the motor to get the engine warm.

“Jack,” he said as the phone was answered, “there’s someone I want to check out, could be a lead. I know, I wasn’t planning on going on my own. Here, I’ll give you the details.”

Everything had spiraled so quickly that all he could do was understand his surroundings and how they related to him. Will held the gun in shaking hands, partly from his inability to keep them stable and the other from the memory of the last time he was forced to shoot someone. The basement was dark, gloomy, punctuated by areas of fluorescent light and a pervasive, echoing sound of water hitting water.

Drip, drip, drip. An evolution of fine gut strings was displayed to him, growing fatter and fatter until they were recognisable as human intestines, laid out with loving care. Will took a steadying breath and tried not to jerk his gun around every corner.

He’d left for a minute, two at the very most. Something had been off about Budge, that much he would admit, but unfortunately something had been more off with Will. The shop had smelled headily of resin and wood and something else, something clinical that seemed out of place. Then the sound, a yelping cry for help as from a wounded animal, beating against his ears, resounding within his own skull. He had tried to seek it out, madly dashing across the busy road, only to realise too late how much his inability to differentiate between realities had cost him. The first officer face down in his own blood, the second garrotted through his lips and cheeks, dumped in one of the many tanks of deep water the basement held. The shake in his hands briefly steadied before worsening.

That Budge’s ambush managed to throw him off balance did not surprise Will, only made the blood rush through his veins doubly fast, *rush rush rush*. Budge was small and lithe like he was, not a powerful man, he thought rapidly as they struggled, Will desperately trying to keep hold of his gun. He would have to rely on his agility, not his brute strength. He tried to use the profile to keep his head clear, keep his mind set in this place, this reality, as he fought for his life.

Yet when he almost lost his hold on the gun the only thing he could think to do was fire. The sound was deafening but the small, wet spray of blood against his hand assured him that the bullet had made contact. Will reeled as Budge pushed him away, stumbling, and he tried to aim at his target again but the impact of sound had disoriented him. He held his hand to his ear, stumbling against the wall as he desperately tried to walk in a straight line. When he finally ascended into the shop once more Budge was already gone. Will blinked in the bright sunlight and tried to think past the steady, loud ringing in his ears.

Where would he go?

Budge was desperate but also angry, he had been found before he could finish his work. He knew he wouldn’t be able to escape, not now, he would want to take others down with him before he went.

Where would he *go*?

He thought of himself as an artist, as a cultured individual, looking down on those he found vulgar or uncouth. People who had annoyed him even just by their association...

'*it seemed he feared for his own safety, not just that of others, as if he would be next on the list*'

Unfinished business, Will thought with a swallow and a quickening to his already absurdly rapid pulse, stumbling into a run as he headed for the one place he hoped he was wrong in predicting.

Hannibal Lecter's consulting room.

He didn't trust himself to drive but the urgency was too great, too much at risk, too much at stake. The tires squealed in protest as he harshly braked around corners, putting his foot down through two red lights and barely missing vehicles which came to a stop with a Doppler effect of honked horns and screeching tyres. By the time he'd pulled into the recognisable street and dumped his car haphazardly half on the pavement, Will felt as if his world had narrowed down to almost nothing but what was in front of him, as if he had reduced to tunnel vision. The pavement seemed like a causeway above a dark abyss. The doorway to Lecter's office lay half open like a portent. Will rushed inside, gun drawn once more. Only this time his hands did not shake, and he rounded the corners silently, listening with hearing that was slowly returning to normal. Tunnel vision like a predator after its prey, eyes forwards, ears forwards, listening for the telltale sounds of a violent struggle which crashed and grunted in the next room. Will sped through the waiting room and bashed through the unlocked door, *rush rush rush*, and barely remembered to shout...

"Stop, FBI!" as the man raised the heavy figurine and prepared to bludgeon the man at his feet, curled away from him, arms raised.

He unconsciously adjusted his stance, pulling his foot and shoulder back as Beverly had taught him, aimed and squeezed the trigger. The recoil was not as harsh and the bullet ripped through cloth then flesh then exited the other side of Budge's throat sending a visceral spray of blood against the wall. The man seemed to fall in slow motion, dropping the heavy figurine in his hands which the man beneath him only barely managed to roll out from under before it hit the wooden floor with a resounding bang. Will rushed forwards, holstering his gun as he did so, and quickly kneeled down to check Budge's pulse. He knew the man was dead as soon as he saw his glazed eyes, wide and open as if in surprise. When he pulled his hand back his fingertips were stained red.

He heard coughing and heavy breathing, turning to his right to see Lecter sitting half splayed on the floor, propped against his desk. His single-mindedness, residual from his burst of adrenaline, made him waste no time in pulling out his phone and calling in the incident whilst moving to Lecter's side.

"And we need medics," he said, realising only as he spoke to Jack Crawford that his voice was shaking, "Dr.Lecter is injured and...and there's another body," Will knew that he sounded surprised even as he stared at the undeniably dead man lying in the middle of the floor, someone he hadn't even noticed until now.

“My patient,” Lecter said roughly, coughing as Will quickly put away his phone, “Budge killed him.”

“Your arm,” was all Will could say, taking in the injuries Lecter had sustained one by one and trying to figure out what to do; burst lip, heavily bruised throat, glazed eyes perhaps from concussion, a bleeding wound revealed under the severed cuff of his suit, a gory ring of blood around his forearm which appeared to be the worst of the trauma he could see.

Bizarrely, Will thought as he helped Lecter from the floor and into his desk chair, it was not entirely the cuts and bruises forming on Lecter’s skin which created the traumatic picture of what had happened. Instead it was the sheer dishevelment of Lecter’s person, tie askew, shirt ruffled, torn and dashed with blood, hair out of place and eyes glazed, that niggled at Will’s world view. Lecter was always the aloof, perfect object of his defined reality, what little there was left of that; with his blood showing his aura of stoicism had been entirely tainted. For the first time since he had met the man Will thought Lecter looked positively human by comparison.

He reached out almost subconsciously and wiped the blood from Lecter’s chin, all the while under the focus of that glazed stare. Will felt his hand shake as he brought it back, both amazed and appalled by his lack of control. It was like a scene from one of his dreams, the edges vibrating, the room blurring in a static fashion while Lecter remained perfectly still and intact. He smiled, watching Will just as Will was sure he himself had watched Budge. Distinct, predatory tunnel vision.

“Thank you, Will,” he said softly, as the FBI arrived and swept the moment away under a sea of feet and questions.

Anxiogène

Chapter Notes

Title translation: That which Causes Anxiety

The snow was getting inside his boots, he could feel it impacting on his trousers, forcing its way in as he lifted his feet through the heavy drift; up with a hush of displaced white powder and down with a sound like someone moving around on a creaky old couch. Will looked up at the landscape around him and squinted slightly against the glare. The white snow, raised in lumps and waves, was delineated only where it met the pale grey sky, peppered with dark clouds, and where the sharp, dark thorns of bare trees punctured the blanket. A chroma-less landscape, existing only in tone. The scrubby bushes beneath the trees looked like half buried hedgehogs, their bristles pinpricked with white. Will made towards them, hoping that he would be more successful there.

"Come on, Buster!" Will called out through cupped, gloved hands, looking around to his left and right for any sign of the patchy tan and white coat of the small dog. He turned around as far as the snow holding his feet still would let him to see the others, snuffling in the snow, running back and forth, Winston watching him with an upright tail and a long tongue flopping out of his mouth. No Buster in sight, "dammit," he muttered to himself under his breath.

He pulled his right foot up with a little difficulty, dragging his knees through the snow, swinging his arms out to keep his balance and his momentum. The snow in his boots felt like it was dripping down into his socks as it melted, *drip, drip, drip*, and Will cursed internally. I swear that dog likes making me suffer, Will thought with a grim smile and he finally pulled free of the snow drift, the barks and growls and the shuffling of padded paws fading away in the background. The ground under his boots became solid, hard, slightly glassy underfoot. It was with trepidation and a sudden pang of fear that Will realised where he was standing. He looked behind him to find the snow bank seemed to have receded, leaving a mirror-like expanse of ice for about twenty feet behind him, more to his right, to his left. Will felt a need to hold his breath as the substance beneath his heavy boots made an audible crack.

Bark! Will looked up in surprise to find Buster, his small ears perked, his head tipped to the right as the dog sat in the middle of the iced lake and stared at him.

"Hey," Will said softly, reaching out with his hand and twitching his fingers, "hey Buster, come on boy. It's not safe here."

Bark bark! The dog replied, baring its teeth and gums in an unnatural growl. Will frowned through the anxiety obvious on his face, "There's no time for that," he said as he dared to inch forwards, the cracking of the ice like a far off boom, a cracking rumble like something

massive falling from a height, hitting the cliff's side on its way down, "come on, let's go home."

Bark, bark, growl! Will froze. It was a slowly dawning realisation that Buster was not growling at him. Will swallowed, turning very slowly around on the unstable ice, feeling lightheaded as a large, vibrating noise rent through the air, like a heavy cord being spun, twirled, faster and faster, as it rent the atmosphere in two. It stood there, the stag, like a hole in the landscape, its black fur and its raven feathers, half on the snow, half on the ice. Will looked at it as if he had seen an omen that he did not want but could not defend against. The stag raised its left hoof, snorting as it did so, and brought it down hard onto the ice beneath, *bang, crumble, splash*. The ice fell down into the water and Will fell with it, his mouth open in a final cry even as the icy water beneath enveloped him. He flailed wildly, trying to gain purchase on something, anything, as the darkness under the ice assimilated him. Reaching up he only met with more resistance, ice meeting his hands, blocking his way back to the surface. He bashed against it, called out even as the water only rushed down into his lungs, choking him. He heard it, *clip, clip, clip, clip, clip*. He looked up as his arms went numb, paralysed, his tongue swollen in his mouth, unable to make a sound. As he drifted down into the water, he thought he saw the stag through the distortion of the ice, staring down at him as he sank, with a look which neither truly cared nor showed any willingness to help.

Help me, his thoughts burst like the last bubbles of air reaching the surface, *help me!*

Will awoke as he always did these days, clutching his blankets in tight knuckled fingers with only the sound of his own panting breath to accompany him. Throwing himself onto his back he searched for the clock: six twenty three. Will lay there for a few moments, slowly becoming aware of the sheen of sweat on his face, his t-shirt sticking to his back and chest. The sweat only transferred to his hand as he tried to wipe at his forehead. He sat up, feeling itchy all over, and pulled off his t-shirt, quickly sliding out of bed and heading for the shower. At least it wasn't three in the morning, like the night before. It was a little disconcerting, putting his head under the spray, but he forced himself to accept it. Washing away the itch was all he could do at this point, until it inevitably returned. He returned to his bedroom in a worse for wear, loose dressing gown, towelling his hair and trying to focus on the rest of his day rather than the last of his night. He smiled and let out a small laugh as he looked up, finding one of the many occupied dog beds empty.

"Down, Winston," he said with a half serious look at the two tone dog, curled up on his warm spot on the dishevelled bed, looking up at him with large eyes and a small thumping wag to his tail as it hit the duvet, "don't think you can give me the eyes, come on, *down*."

The dog finally complied, leaving the bed front paws first as he stretched out, dipping his back, before pulling down his back feet one at a time. Will scruffled Winston's head as he walked past, receiving a half hearted whine for his troubles. His morning routine seemed to pass in a blur of toast, coffee, grabbing whatever clothes were closest to hand and searching for his glasses which he couldn't find. Eventually he ended up at work feeling more dazed than truly awake, forcibly avoiding contact with anyone. This became unfortunately impossible when he walked into the small staff room, with its noisy air conditioning and harsh lighting, to find Beverly Katz reading something from her tablet and eating a breakfast muffin.

"You're early," Beverly said with a raised eyebrow and a half smile by way of greeting, something which Will always felt was designed to try and put him at ease; it did not work today.

"So are you," Will retorted, keeping his eyes on the file in his hands; he had grabbed it quickly from the backseat of his car and was irrationally worried pages had fallen out.

"Touché," she said with a short shrug, watching him closely, "I didn't think you would be in today."

"I have to see Jack," Will said, sitting down tightly and considering grabbing a cup of weak coffee from the pot sitting on the counter. Eventually he decided against it; he felt wound up enough without more caffeine.

"About Budge?" Beverly asked, taking a bite of her muffin.

"Yeah," Will said, refusing to go any further.

"Ok," Beverly said, her elongation of the word showing her understanding that Will was being deliberately standoffish; another moment of silence, before she spoke again, "you know, you're looking a little rough today. You sure you're alright?"

"Never been better," Will lied through a forced and entirely false smile.

"Right," Beverly said, further showcasing her ability to say a thousand words through her intonation alone, "well, I'm still here if you ever want to talk about it. Sometimes it helps."

Will had wanted to thank her, at least, but couldn't find it in himself at that point in time. Still busy preparing himself for the dressing down to come from Jack, reading obsessively through the report he had made for the raid on Budge's shop to make sure he remembered everything the way he had written it. The last thing he wanted to find out was that his mind had betrayed him on that too.

"Long night?" was the first thing Jack asked him as Will entered his office, "You look rough."

"No, well yes," Will said with a sigh, "just bad dreams, that's all."

"Well, I haven't been having the best sleep these last few nights either," Jack said with a significant look at Will, "maybe you could help me with that by clarifying this report to me."

It had been inevitable, Will knew that, but the thought of explaining it was still slightly nauseating. Jack kept glancing at him after every question as they worked through his report, looking up from under his raised brows and in no way hiding the fact that he was strictly analysing everything Will said. When they returned to the part Will knew Jack had his biggest problem with, Will knew he wasn't helping himself by being vague.

"I thought I heard something outside," Will said, looking off to the left of Crawford's wide desk, focusing on a small pen holder with three black pens jutting from inside.

"You thought you heard something," Jack repeated authoritatively, taking a deep breath and sitting back in his chair, "you know that doesn't tell me a lot. What exactly did you think you heard?"

"A scream," Will said after a moment's hesitation; it wasn't exactly a lie, just a manipulation of what exactly he thought he had heard scream, "someone was screaming. I went outside to see why."

"You went outside to see if someone was screaming," Jack said, his deep voice becoming increasingly devoid of sympathy, "leaving two officers inside that shop with a serial killer who proceeded to butcher them. How long were you out there?"

"A minute," Will said quickly, "two at the most. I went out, checked, and then I came back inside. That's when I found the first officer down in the second room on the left. I swear, Jack, we only went there to interview him, I couldn't have tipped him off from anything I said, he had no reason to attack us."

"Well he obviously thought he had a damn good reason," Jack said, pausing as he composed himself, looking to the wall on his left and sighing tightly; when he looked back at Will his eyes were no longer livid, but there was an underlying anger there, "how many times do I have to tell you that no one goes anywhere alone when with a suspect?"

"I know," Will said, nodding, opening his mouth to continue but he was cut off.

"Then if you know, why the hell did you do it anyway?" Jack verged on bellowing, such was the contrast between his contained irritation and all out antagonism, "Don't tell me that you know something when you obviously don't."

Will shut his lips tightly and slumped back in his chair, rubbing at his face with his right hand.

"Let me get this straight, are you trying to blame me for this?" Will asked, his tone taught with a suppressed anger unlike Jack's, an anger borne of guilt.

"No, I'm not blaming you, I'm trying to make you see the consequences of breaking the rules," Jack said forcefully, "you need to make me believe that you will follow at least the smallest amount of procedure without me there supervising you. I need to trust you, Will."

Jack sat forwards, frowning as he looked down at the desk before him. He looked up as he spoke, his voice quieted from its angry rage to a calm but slightly desperate tone, "what did you find when you went outside the shop."

"I...I went outside to see if there was something there," Will said, knowing he hadn't answered the question.

"And was there anyone?" Jack asked pointedly.

"...No," Will said succinctly.

The silence wasn't accusing so much as it was resigned. Jack nodded softly before once more sitting back in his chair, all anger seemingly drained from him.

"You think I'm hearing things," Will said bluntly.

"Do you think you're hearing things?" Jack asked.

"No," Will said, hating the lie as it stuck in his throat, "no, I don't know."

"When is your next session with Dr. Lecter?" Jack asked, not beating about the bush.

"The twenty ninth, why?" Will asked, his visage darkening at Jack's blatant but subversive way of saying that he sounded crazy.

"I want you to make another appointment before then," Jack said, a nice way of putting an order so that it didn't sound too much like one.

"Why?" Will asked even though he knew the answer.

"Because if you won't speak to me about this then maybe you'll speak to him," Jack said compellingly with a shake of his head, "and once you find whatever it is you need to find, maybe I can put you back out into the field. Until then I think that any consulting you do should be restricted strictly to the lab."

"Come on Jack..." Will tried to argue.

"I'm sorry, did I make that seem like a choice to you?" Jack asked bluntly, "I am more than happy to keep you on with these cases Will, in fact I insist on it. I insist on it so much that I am telling you to go and get yourself sorted out so I can put you *back* in the field. Understand me?"

Will adjusted his jaw, feeling his teeth grind together as he did, so tightly was it shut. He forced himself not to say any of the number of insults and cutting words clamouring to get out of his mouth, instead settling on, "yes, I understand," something which at least seemed to make Jack Crawford mildly happy about their meeting.

The bruises had deepened to a series of purple and yellow blushes against neck and face, the burst lip nothing but a small, dark red scab and the multitude of other wounds were hidden beneath a deep maroon and slate grey suit and a gold and midnight blue paisley tie. Will stood outside the door until it was answered this time, partly because he didn't want to disturb the man too badly while he was still convalescing, mainly because he wasn't exactly sure he wanted to re-enact the night he had stayed at Lecter's home any more than need be.

"Please, come in," Lecter said, standing back from the door and allowing Will to enter.

He entered through the familiar hallway but was unsure of where to go after that considering this wasn't exactly a social call. Will looked back to Lecter as the man locked his front door behind them and indicated to the closer, right hand door with an upraised palm.

"The drawing room would be best, I think," he said, watching as Will walked back towards him and took the indicated door, "it is the most comfortable."

It was an odd sensation to walk through to a room he had been in before, but not be able to remember walking into that room in the first place. It was quite different in the afternoon light, the red walls far more subdued than they had seemed in the firelight, no shadows or flickering sparks to draw his gaze. It seemed like a room of repose, a long brown couch at the far left hand side, partly placed into the large bay window, with two accompanying chairs and a low coffee table, the fireplace and its armchairs on the right. A large, dark mahogany cabinet sat against the left wall, bedecked with ornate silver handles and two twisting antler horns trapped together on a long, thick wooden podium. Will felt Lecter enter the room past him as he continued to survey from the doorway, the man's hand reaching up to very softly move him to the left, a rustle of fabric and a solid brush of arm and chest against his side. Will took an involuntary breath through his nose at the action, feeling his spine straighten, but said nothing.

"While my office is out of commission," Lecter said, seemingly unconscious to the reaction he had caused, "this room seems the most obvious choice for its replacement. Take a seat wherever suits you best," Lecter looked at Will as he removed his jacket, an involuntary shiver running through his body; he raised his eyebrows a fraction and inquired, "a hot cup of tea, perhaps?"

"Actually, yes, that would be great," Will said as he looked about for somewhere to put his coat. Truthfully he just wished to be alone in the room for a little while with his thoughts and no knowing eyes watching him.

He decided on the armchair closest to the window, so he could see outside. The small walkway down the side of the house was lined with evergreen bushes, each topped with an icing of snow. There was a short, sharp sound suddenly beyond the window, making Will hesitate as he made to sit down. He looked up, very relieved to find a blackbird there, hanging from a seed ball which was placed in a tall, slender tree beyond the wall between Lecter's property and the next house. The bird spun lazily on the ball, pecking erratically. Will sat down in the chair and watched the bird quietly. He was aware of the *tap, tap, tap* of approaching feet but continued to watch the bird until it fluttered away in a mess of wings and falling seeds.

"You choose the chair in the light," Lecter said as he entered, carrying a tray with a small, stainless steel tea pot and two white china cups and saucers atop it; Will watched with a twinge of concern as Lecter appeared to wince as he bent down to place the tray on the coffee table. Lecter cleared his throat and stood, brushing down the front of his suit before taking a seat on the couch opposite Will, "does that mean you are feeling dark, Will?" he asked as he leaned forwards gently in order to pour.

"Maybe somewhere in between," Will said as he watched the steam rise from the teapot, swirling outwards and dissipating like smoky tendrils. He leaned forwards and took the cup and saucer from the tray himself so as to save Lecter any further pain, for which the man rewarded him with a quick quirk to the ends of his lips and a glance; Will filed the action

under 'gratitude'. He brought the cup up to his face, welcoming the aromatic, vaporous cloud, "Chamomile? You think I need to relax?"

"Or perhaps help sleeping," Lecter said as he sat back into the couch with his own cup, "you do not look as if you have had a good night's sleep, if you don't mind my saying."

"Feel free," Will said sourly, "no one else seems to have minded pointing it out."

"Do you resent them for that?" Lecter asked after a pause, "Their concern?"

"I don't resent them," Will argued with a soft frown, "it's just never helpful to be told something you already know."

Lecter's eyes were drawn away from Will as he took a drink from his cup, allowing Will a few seconds where he could survey the doctor without his knowledge. The man was sitting oddly, not his usual casual pose with his legs folded and his neck loose. Instead he seemed to be carefully positioned, feet firmly on the floor, with his limbs held in check and his movements calculated and cautious.

"Actually I was just wondering," Will asked, putting his cup and saucer onto the table, "how you are."

"As well as can be expected," Lecter replied after another sip of tea, during which he seemed to become conscious of his own strict body language and correct it by loosening himself into the chair slightly, "a little tender here and there, but otherwise I am fine."

"I didn't just mean physically," Will said, trying his best to be tactful even though he knew his idea of tact was usually a little skewed compared to others'.

As he swallowed Lecter pulled his lips back before taking an audible breath, letting it out in soft rush of air. Will felt the need to pick up his tea again just to have something to do with his hands.

"It was not the first time I witnessed someone's death," Lecter confessed.

"Is it the first time you've had someone try to kill you?" Will asked pointedly, trying to drive home the fact that the attack would have perhaps left scars no one could see.

"...So viciously, yes," Lecter replied, placing his cup back into the saucer with a clink, "I did have a patient stab me twice with a scalpel when I was still a practicing surgeon, but with the profusion of drugs in his system I could hardly hold him accountable for his actions. Mr. Budge on the other hand...yes, that was the first time I have felt someone wished to kill me simply for the act of doing so."

The candour of Lecter's answer had been unexpected. Will felt responsible, somehow, for returning the favour. You would lie to Jack, he thought, even Alana if it came to it. Would you lie to him too? Can't I have someone, just one person who understands me? A small gust of wind outside stirred the bushes, causing pieces of snow to slide from their perches on lush, green leaves; *thump, thump, thump*.

"Yeah," Will said, shaking his head, "I know that feeling, although it's been a while since I felt it."

"Felt that you do not understand why someone would wish to kill you?" Lecter asked.

"Nowadays," Will replied, "I feel like I know all too well why someone would want to, like I can...see myself through their eyes."

"Do you like what you see, Will?" Lecter asked, taking another sip of tea.

"I don't hate myself," Will argued back even though he knew getting defensive wouldn't help.

"But you don't trust yourself," Lecter rejoined.

"No," Will agreed after a moment's consideration, "not recently, I...I don't know what to trust," he took a steadying breath and decided to plough on without thinking about the consequences, because that was easier than considering how much he had fucked up, "When I was at Tobias Budge's shop I thought I heard something."

"Something?" Lecter prompted.

"A noise, a sound like an animal in pain," Will clarified agitatedly, "it was yelping, I thought I could hear it outside, but when I asked no one else could hear it. I went outside to check and when I came back Budge had killed the two officers who'd come with me."

"Was there anything outside, Will?" Lecter asked the one question out of the dozens he could have that Will resented the most.

"No," he said forcefully, "Of course there was nothing out there, I knew there was nothing there."

"Then why did you go outside?" Lecter asked reasonably, so much so that it made Will feel like screaming, "Did you wish for there to be something to find?"

"Yes," Will replied harshly, feeling his emotions rise and his voice begin to tremble involuntarily, "yes because the alternative is that I'm *losing my mind*. I'm having auditory hallucinations, visual hallucinations, I lose time and I don't know where I've been or what I've done when I was there. I can't trust my own senses to tell me the truth."

"Then trust someone else's to," Lecter said; he leaned forwards carefully and refilled Will's half drunk cup of tea, "let me help you. It will do you no good to work yourself into a frenzy," Will picked up the tea instinctually even though he had no intention of drinking it, "at our last meeting you told me you were experiencing blackouts, hallucinations. What do these symptoms make you fear?"

"If it's not neurological," Will said slowly, forcing out his words, "then it means that it's all in my mind, that my mind is sick."

"But we have not yet ruled out the neurological," Lecter said practically, "it would seem only logical to rule out all of the possibilities before you start resigning yourself to explanations

that may be eliminated by evaluation."

"I thought you were convinced it wasn't neurological," Will asked with a frown, feeling a welling sense of hope knotting in his stomach.

"But you are not convinced," Lecter countered, "and right now that is all that matters. My own professional opinion is that these symptoms you are experiencing stem from a psychological malady but I have been known to be wrong before. When it comes to your health, Will, I would rather not take the risk."

It took a few moments of collecting himself to squeeze out a "thank you," to which Lecter appeared to believe was not necessary, if his subtle nod was anything to go by. At that time Will couldn't focus on the doctor's reactions as he was too busy desperately clinging to his last hope, that this was something physical, a disease, a virus, anything but his mind revolting against him, twisting him and drowning him in a sea of doubts and violence. He put down his cup in case his hands started to shake again. Lecter had picked up his small, leather bound notebook from the coffee table, opening it to flick through the pages to the address section at the back.

"I know a reliable man for the job," Lecter said, "an old colleague of mine, Donald Sutcliffe, he specialised in neurology. He is very highly regarded and, personally, I consider him an artist in his field. I am sure he still works at..." Lecter continued to flick through a few more pages before stopping, "yes, Noble Hills. I can refer you to him. If there is anything to find, believe me, he will find it."

Standing from the chair was all he could do to stop from fidgeting. He found himself walking to the window and staring out at the bushes, the lightly swinging seed ball. He could barely see a pale reflection of himself in the glass, staring back at him sightlessly.

"There is something else troubling you?" Lecter asked and, from the closeness of his voice, Will could tell he had moved to stand slightly behind him.

"I feel...responsible," Will said eventually, as the wind blew again, agitating the snow.

"For the officers' deaths?" Lecter suggested.

"Yes," Will nodded, hating that it was true, "but for other things too. With Alana, and you, I feel like I've dragged you into my world and now you're walking around blind with targets painted on your backs."

"Believe me, Will," Lecter's voice seemed infinitesimally closer yet Will didn't look over his shoulder, couldn't quite name the anticipation and odd chill at not knowing how close the man was, "Dr. Bloom and myself can take care of ourselves. It is you we should be looking after, not the other way around," another sound as Lecter moved to his side, allowing Will's shoulders to loosen from their anxiety, "and if you are truly intent on taking responsibility for my being attacked, then know that it is outweighed by my gratitude towards you for saving my life."

The reflection of Lecter's face wasn't enough for Will to gauge his reaction. He looked to his left and found himself looking straight into the other man's eyes, merely two feet away; Will felt his personal space cramp up but did not move as Lecter spoke, "a feat for which I will be eternally grateful."

"You don't have to thank me," Will said, looking back to the glass.

"But I do it nonetheless," Lecter said as his reflection stood next to Will's own, both looking out onto the snowy bushes even as they stared back at themselves.

The click of computer keys filling the small lecture theatre irritated him, but Will suppressed the need to frown in favour of positing a question.

"Can anyone answer why Tobias Budge did not flee Baltimore when he had the chance?"

The room quieted, that much he was glad for. He could see some subtle conferring but mostly stares at the picture on the screen he had changed it to; a crime scene photograph of Hannibal Lecter's office not long after the attack. A hand went up in the back, a blonde haired man. Will didn't have much hope for their answer being what he wanted but he would take it anyway.

"Because he believed there was no way he could be found?" the man answered uncertainly.

"No," Will said, continuing swiftly even though he could see other arms being raised, "he did not run because he could not run. At the moment he left his shop he had lost everything he held dear, all that he had been working towards, and he knew who was responsible for that. Franklin Froideveaux's tip, via Dr. Lecter, had destroyed not only his ruse but also his vision and his ability to complete that vision."

It was impossible to miss the door opening and closing again; Will spared a glance for the newcomer. He looked to the clock on the wall and knew that he needed to sum up. He continued, looking back to his students.

"In his mind Budge was elevating his victims beyond any true artistic act they could possibly hope to achieve," Will said as he clicked the remote in his right hand and the picture changed to a far more gruesome photograph showing the tanks of human entrails as they were slowly transformed into gut strings, "he wished to convert them into something greater, something divine, a perfect melody. As gestalt entities they were simply vulgar people, but as their individual parts they were a means to a superior end. If you are to take anything away with you from this case," Will clicked his remote one final time to show a large image of Budge's business card which Lecter had given to him, "let it be that no lead or detail is to be overlooked, but investigated carefully and with full consideration for its consequences."

He hadn't wanted to give the lecture but Jack had insisted, as Jack was wont to do. Will stood by his desk, leaning against it with his eyes to the floor while he waited for the lecture hall's worth of people to file past, leaving him alone with his visitor. He looked up as she approached, her usual smile in place; he returned it even as he wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"I take it Jack had something to do with this?" Alana asked, recognising the situation for what it was.

"He thought it would be an important lesson," Will said as he adjusted his glasses.

"For the students or for you?" she asked, making Will instantly avoid the question.

"So," he said, making Alana frown slightly at his avoidance, "what are you doing here?"

"I was just in this neck of the woods," she said, obviously deciding to ignore it, "thought I'd drop by and see how you were feeling."

"Oh, well, lecturing on intestines always puts me in a good mood," Will said sarcastically but with a smile, making Alana shake her head affectionately; it surprised even him how quickly and bluntly he changed his tack, "might be even better if I knew how you felt."

It was charged, yes, but Will thought it was still a fair inquiry. No matter what he had told Lecter, he hadn't truly believed that Alana's answer that night in his cabin had told him the whole truth.

"I don't think that's a good topic," Alana said slowly, "and I might have to defer answering until I have a better handle on it."

"Meaning you haven't got a handle on it now?" he asked; he knew he was fishing, and very obviously, but it was impossible not to. Standing there in the dim glow of the theatre's lights and the blank projector Will didn't think he'd ever seen anyone more desirable than Alana Bloom was in that instant. He could almost see her mind shifting back and forth in her dark eyes. Why do you do this to yourself? he wanted to ask himself. He knew what she was going to say, but in truth it was almost more painful to know that she had feelings for him but wouldn't act on them, than to think she didn't care about him at all.

"Yes," Alana answered reluctantly, "but it doesn't change my decision."

"Right," Will nodded; you set yourself up for the fall there, he thought.

"But I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me," Alana continued as if that were an entirely normal thing to suggest considering their previous conversation, "there's a great Italian just down from my place, I haven't been in a while."

"Alana, you actively avoided even being in a room alone with me until a few weeks ago," Will said candidly, "and I'm pretty sure you just made it clear how you feel," even though Will was certain that she hadn't.

"Well, it's a really nice Italian," Alana said, using humour to subvert the awkwardness, "and I always feel like a bit of a loser eating there on my own. I thought maybe I could go there with a friend instead."

The offer made sense but, simultaneously, seemed like a microcosm of everything he did not need right at that moment. Will put down the remote on the desk and walked to his chair to pick up his coat. He could feel Alana watching him, waiting for his judgement.

"I would," he said, noting her disappointment, "but I'm afraid I already have dinner plans."

"Oh, ok," she said, passing her tone off unsuccessfully as casual, "although it's nice to hear you have plans. Anyone I know?"

"Dr. Lecter is having a soirée," Will said as he joined her once more at the front of the desk and they walked out together, "I've been invited as hired help."

"Hannibal's having a dinner without me," Alana said with mock annoyance, "I'll have to have words with him."

As they walked down the stairs Will began to wonder if he was the only one who *didn't* call Lecter by his first name, "oh, believe me, you wouldn't want to be at this one," he said.

"Why?" Alana asked, confused.

"Dr. Chilton will be attending," Will said.

"Oh, yeah, then I will definitely pass on that," Alana said with a wry laugh; they walked out into the parking lot and Will recognised Alana's car, walking her to it, "are you sure I can't lure you away from an evening of obnoxious small talk?" she asked one more time.

"I'd really better not," Will said, letting a white lie slip, "I promised I would be there."

"Ok," Alana smiled, "then I'm sure I'll see you soon."

"Another night, maybe?" Will said quickly, feeling like she was making it sound too final; Alana looked at him as if waiting for an explanation. Refusing to give the truth, he settled for humour, shrugging as he said "I love Italian."

"Yeah," she said, "I'd like that," Will held her coat while she fished in her purse for her car keys, "well, I hope whatever you have tonight isn't too delicious," she said as she took her coat back from him, "or me and my takeout lasagne will be jealous."

"I'm sure it'll be disgusting," Will said with a mock grimace, making her smile all the way up to her eyes.

"Bye Will," Alana said as she opened her car door.

He stood and watched her drive off, hands in his pockets, before walking slowly to his own car. As he got in he really wondered why he hadn't taken her up on her offer, even though he knew deep down that staring at her all evening and having a good time would have been just as much of a torture as speaking to Frederick Chilton.

Or almost as much.

"A chocrute garnie," came Lecter's announcement as he entered the room carrying two main courses, "with raspberry cider sauerkraut," he placed the first before Will, who nodded tightly

in thanks as he placed his napkin on his lap, and then before Dr. Chilton who looked far too pleased with himself as far as Will was concerned, "and potato gratin dauphinoise."

"Exquisite, as always," Chilton complemented Lecter in a tone that set Will's teeth on edge, looking back to Will as Lecter left to retrieve his own plate.

So far dinner had not been entirely excruciating but it hadn't exactly been pleasant either. Chilton, for whatever reason Lecter had decided to invite the man to dinner, was being exceedingly well behaved in his conversation even if it was still mainly focused narcissistically on his own achievements. Truthfully Will had so far gained most of his entertainment from watching Lecter browbeat Chilton by coming up with more probable theories and likely diagnoses of Chilton's patients.

Also the starter of salmon tartar had been utterly delicious. Will had almost wished there had been more fish for the main. Instead he looked at his plate to find a selection of finely sliced sausage, what looked like pork loin and perhaps lamb, arrayed across the left of the plate, with a finely stacked rectangle of dauphinoise potatoes set into a gratin and topped with diced cherry tomatoes on the right, and a bustle of deep red sauerkraut set at the top of the plate. It was no brown trout but Will was quite sure that, by the time he had finished, he wouldn't be able to complain about that fact.

"Please, gentlemen, begin," Lecter prompted on his return, setting his own plate onto the table and sitting down, "I would hate for it to go cold."

"This sausage," Chilton began as Will took a forkful of the sauerkraut and the potatoes and put it into his mouth; a wonderful combination of tart and sour cabbage mixed with the creamy and perfectly cooked starchiness of the potatoes. He almost missed what Chilton continued to say as he marveled at the taste in his mouth, "is it pork?"

"Veal," Lecter corrected as he played host and poured the wine, "ethically sourced, of course."

"Ah," Chilton said, shrugging off his mistake, "the spice threw me. Fennel?"

"Cloves and nutmeg," Lecter said with a polite smile, though Will saw the condescension there, "with a dash of cinnamon."

"Delicious," Chilton returned the smile, subtly trying to hide away, Will thought, from the fact that he obviously had no idea what he was talking about. Perhaps this evening is looking up. Chilton took a sip of the white wine Lecter had poured for him, "and a wonderful choice in wine."

"Actually, Will supplied the wine," Lecter said, tipping his head to Will who covered his reaction by taking a drink of the wine himself; crisp, dry, and exceedingly fruity, he was glad it was nice because he hadn't really known what he was doing when he chose it, "a Bonneau du Martray chardonnay."

"Well, I see you have better taste in wines than you do in work," Chilton deferred insultingly to Will who decided to take another drink from his glass in response, this one more of a

swallow that a sip, "but you appear to be recovering well from your attack, Hannibal, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Nothing heals the mind faster than accepting and moving past undesirable experiences," Lecter said before taking a small forkful of food and chewing it thoughtfully, he swallowed before continuing, "after all, in circumstances such as these, the mind is so much harder to heal than the body."

He cut into his pork loin a little harder than was necessary on hearing Lecter's words, pushing the gratin close to the edge of the plate. Will edged it back with his knife before continuing as if nothing had happened. You can't react this way to everything you hear, Will thought harshly to himself, he didn't mean anything by it. Are you going to have to add paranoia to the list of symptoms? Will didn't need to ask himself that. He knew paranoid was already on the list.

"I myself have never been attacked by a patient, we keep high security measures at the hospital," Chilton said, once more pulling the conversation back to himself; Will ground his teeth as he swallowed, "I've had plenty thrown at me over the years, but never a knife."

"I'm sure your nurse didn't feel that way," Will said without thinking about why it was inappropriate; once the food hit his stomach he seemed to realise he had said the words out loud and not just in his head, if the looks he was getting were anything to go by. He would have apologised except he meant exactly what he said. Instead he took another long drink of wine and continued with his dinner. Will hoped that his need to numb his mind with alcohol didn't further impair his ability to tell what was spoken in his head rather than spoken with his own lips.

"Well," Chilton said succinctly, "I won't say there haven't been oversights, and tragedies do occur no matter how many precautions are taken."

"It is true that certain events cannot be predicted," Lecter said, "and the effects can be devastating. I have known many psychiatrists to give up practicing all together once they suffer and attack by a patient."

"Ah, yes," Chilton said, "you had a colleague who was attacked, did you not Hannibal? Bedelia Du Maurier. How is she? I haven't seen her in years."

"She is well," Lecter said, not elaborating further.

"Well, send her my regards," Chilton said, "she was always one of my more demure visitors and showed actual interest in my research," Chilton wasn't subtle about where he directed his gaze when he spoke his barbed words; Will ignored him and continued eating his dinner.

Eventually, after a quick desert and then a longer than need be finishing of a second bottle of wine and a selection of fine cheeses from Lecter's fridge, Chilton left. Will could barely express his relief at being dismissed from his duty as dinner guest. While Lecter showed Chilton to the door Will fished for his keys in his jacket which he had left in the kitchen. He was still looking when he heard the soft tap of feet approaching.

"I do hope you don't plan on driving home," Lecter said as he brought the cheese back into the kitchen, placing the tray on the table as he set about returning them to the fridge.

"I'm fine, I didn't have that much," Will said.

"You had four and half glasses, by my count," Lecter said as he wrapped the cheeses individually, "I could call you a cab..."

"But no one goes to my house," Will finished for him; he tried all of the pockets again, getting frustrated, "too far out. I can't find my keys."

"I took the liberty of putting them somewhere safe," Lecter said as he closed the fridge door; Will looked at him in expectant confusion, until he realised the doctor's intent, "the bed in the spare room is still made."

"Look, I'm *fine*," Will reiterated, even if he knew he wasn't entirely as fine as he would have liked; driving in the dark with the drowsiness of the wine he would have worried he would lose track of everything and end up ploughed into a tree, "and I don't want to make a habit of this."

Lecter merely looked at him with what Will could only interpret as mildly wounded sympathy. He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, placing his jacket back onto the high stool by the table. Recognise when you've been beaten, he thought, feeling that this was perhaps less engineered by himself than by others. Namely the man who'd been refilling his glass all night under the guise of politeness.

He just couldn't for the life of him understand why yet.

Surprising sunlight woke him; not howling, not the crashing of waves, not the humming vibration of a cello. Will blinked open his eyes and wasn't sure whether his nightmares had simply become a lot brighter and less anxious, or he had somehow managed to sleep through the night without remembering waking up once.

He managed not to panic this time, waking in a strange room, but instead stared at the doorway through slit eyes. His mild hangover did not appreciate the joyful sunlight. The deep blue walls and grey paneling of the room were more calming on the eyes, he focused on that while he curled into the bedcovers and felt the reliable sheen of sweat covering his skin. At least some things don't change he thought sourly as he rolled onto his back and stared up at the extravagant light fixture.

Which wasn't there. Will realised this fact almost simultaneously with the fact that he remembered the spare room had cream walls, not blue. Despite the small amount of pain the action caused Will jerked his head to the left and found the rest of the room not only larger but also completely unfamiliar. He sat up as quickly as his body would allow to be faced with a grand fireplace, two chairs and an elaborately gilt mirror reflecting his own panicked face back at him. The spare room was devoid of personalisation, this room was filled with paintings, small, large, twisting elk horns upon the walls, a book upon the small table by the fire with a bookmark. It was with an ineluctable sense of his own folly that he looked to the

left side of the large bed, decked in blue and cream, and found the other side unmade. This is...he thought with a rising sense of sheer mortification.

Will closed his eyes and tipped his head to the right in resignation, his fingers balling into the soft sheets, and allowed himself the luxury of two words in his mind to sum up his feelings, *ah fuck*, before he climbed calmly out of the bed and walked out of the door. The different angle of the corridor threw him for a moment, until he realised he was on the other side of it. He could hear movement from downstairs, clinking of utensils or plates. Where did I leave my jacket? Will hurriedly thought, the front of his head heavy with unsure sleep and the fuzz left by the wine. When he entered the guest room the sight he was greeted with only compounded his feelings of apprehension.

The bed was unmade in every sense of the word. The heavy duvet lay mainly on the floor, only clinging to the bed by a desperate corner, while the exposed valance appeared to have been ripped at the middle, hanging partly outwards in a curl. Will didn't want to look at it anymore as he felt his hands beginning to shake. Why don't I remember? he repeated over and over in his mind as he wiped jerkily at his forehead, the crimson arm of his pyjamas coming away dark with sweat. He changed quickly, unable to think about fixing the mess he had left, and walked downstairs as quietly as he could, rapidly trying to remember why he hadn't left the night before.

Keys! The shape of absent keys left a hole in his memory. Will took a moment to close his eyes, drowning out the sound of the oven door opening in the kitchen. He put his hand in his pockets, all of them over and again, but the keys hadn't been there; then Lecter had said, "*I took the liberty of putting them somewhere safe*". Will kept his eyes closed, trying to think under pressure as to where Lecter would presume would be 'safe'. Not an actual safe, Will disregarded, too much of a pun, *too much* overall. His own jacket pocket? No, he wouldn't leave them out in the open, too obvious. Somewhere then...somewhere that would be the last place I would look for them, but with enough relevance that he would find it amusing. Will opened his eyes and hurriedly walked into the drawing room, scanning the area quickly until his eyes fell on the tea tray Lecter had served him from on his last visit, set neatly on the side mantle with the teapot still atop it. Too out of place, Will thought as he approached and flipped the lid open. He reached in with pinched fingers and pulled out his keys, shaking his head. Like a bloody Easter egg hunt? Will asked himself, which only brought up further ideas of Lecter toying with him for reasons he didn't want to think about. I thought you were trying to second guess him here? he thought accusingly, Are you playing with me Dr. Lecter?

Will hesitated at the door to the drawing room as he heard footsteps. He pulled back behind the doorway and watched carefully as Lecter walked out of the kitchen and towards the dining room, carrying a tray of scrambled eggs and what might have been large, fried tomatoes. Will didn't have the propensity to care as he took his chance to quick walk to the front door, unlock it, and slip out pulling it to behind him. The air outside was bitingly cold without his jacket but he didn't have the luxury of trying to grab that too without risking an interaction that he frankly never wished to have.

Yeah, Will thought as he got into his car and sat there against the chill seat, feeling his eyes blink rapidly as he ignored the recklessness of his actions in favour of starting the engine, it's not like you work with the guy or anything, is it, he thought. Will only hoped that Lecter's

dislike of discourtesy would preclude him bringing up the incident altogether. You woke up in the man's bed, Will said to himself as he put the car in gear and did a bad job of getting out of the tight parking spot he'd managed to squeeze into the night before, I will be so bloody lucky.

Souvenirs Refoulés

Chapter Notes

> As I don't think any of the dogs are named further than Winston and Buster, I went ahead and named the lot of them! If they are named please let me know and I can change it.
>
> Title translation: Hidden Memories (or lit. Memories Forced Back)

The pill bottle upended but nothing came out. Will shook it again while the car bumped over rough ground and cursed under his breath as he shoved the empty container back into his pocket. He could feel another empty against his knuckles as he pulled his hand out, zipping the pocket up.

"Say something?" Jack asked even as he kept his eyes on the road, adjusting the wheel carefully as they edged along the icy surface, lined by large rocks and wasteland.

"It's nothing," Will said as he chewed at the inside of his bottom lip and tried to ignore the throbbing ache behind his eyes.

The headaches had been getting worse. The only consolation was that so far he'd been keeping them at bay. Two pills, dry, headache gone for a few hours until he needed another two; that had been his daily routine for so long that he didn't even think twice about it. Stress, he'd thought, it's just the stress. Only now he wasn't so sure. Lately he felt like he'd been going through aspirin like a kid through candy. The appointment is on Wednesday, he reassured himself, shielding his eyes as the sun shone momentarily through the thick, heavy blanket of grey cloud. Just keep it together until then.

At the end of the dirt track they found a cluster of vehicles already parked; two large, black, standard issue FBI SUV's and two smaller sedans, one of which he was sure belonged to Beverly Katz. Jack parked haphazardly and the creaking jerk of the hand break was enough to make Will close his eyes and breathe steadily through his nose, the pain snapping between his temples. Crawford didn't seem to notice anything amiss, or so Will hoped, and exited the car first, letting in a blast of freezing air. Will gave himself a few more seconds alone, rubbing his gloved fingers gently over his forehead, before he too braved the cold.

What Lecter had written in his recommendation letter Will didn't know and was almost sure he never would. All he was certain of was that when he turned up at HQ five days prior, Jack had been smiling. That was all he needed to know; he was back in the field and out of suspicion. Yet the 'how' still bothered him somewhat. Considering he had purposefully missed his last two appointments with Lecter, Will had been honestly expecting to turn up and have Jack tear him a new one. Conversely it seemed that Lecter had cleared him for

active duty even though Will had essentially broken contact with him for a week and a half and, before that, hardly shown himself to be of stable mind. Why, why, why? The question hadn't left his mind since he had been called in on this case. Why hadn't Lecter informed Jack of his missed appointments?

It was irksome to know he had blanks in his memory that Lecter could no doubt explain and yet the thought of contacting the man made him squirm. I'm not one to be embarrassed, Will thought as he walked across the frozen ground, it's more than that. I can feel the...hesitation in both of us. What does that mean? Will grimaced as the wind picked up and opened his jacket, rushing inside to devour whatever warmth it could find. He pulled his jacket closed with gloved hands and zipped it up forcefully. Truthfully, the thought of asking Lecter how he had managed to end up in the man's bed just seemed like adding insult to injury.

Overall, he and Lecter's recent lack of interaction was sprinkled with a confusing set of mistruths, Will thought, from Lecter it appeared as barely an apology and almost an absolution. Why Lecter would wish Will back in the field even though he was well aware of his mental state was more than Will could comprehend at that moment. He would just be thankful for it and move on.

"It's down on the beach," Jack interrupted his thoughts as Will stood shivering by one of the black SUVs, squinting in pain against the bright light of the landscape.

One relief came in something that should not have offered it; the pain in his skull paled momentarily on his decent to the beach and his introduction to their crime scene. At first sight the towering totem appeared as a jumble of unidentifiable objects scrambled together in a semblance of order. Will blinked as the image buzzed while he walked carefully down the exposed, frozen, sandy slope. He craned his neck to the left but halted the action before he got very far; he let out a soft puff of breath rather than shout out loud at the lancing pain across his shoulder blades. He decided to keep his head as still as possible while he followed Jack closer, the totem coming into clearer focus, becoming the monstrous thing he was about to know it as.

Black coated FBI crime scene specialists swarmed over the area like carrion beetles. As he approached Will was afforded a better view; seven graves for seven bodies for a multitude of frozen limbs and heads roped together. Each grave, hacked out of the icy sand, was marked with a numbered yellow cone, depersonalising the horrific structure that sat in the centre. Will circled it while Jack stopped, staring at the scene with a hard to read gaze. The thing itself was a standing nightmare, something out of a horror film; so elaborate that Will worried for a split second if he were even awake. Time, he thought quickly as he disassociated himself from the lucid terror before him, this would have taken a long, long time. Planning too. He looked down at the holes in the sand and managed to force objectivity on himself. He looked back at the totem and frowned. Too many limbs stared back at him, and far too many skulls and leathery faces to fit only seven graves. He could hear Zeller and Price speaking to each other as he focused.

"World's sickest jigsaw puzzle," Zeller mumbled as he pointed a large black camera at the top of the totem and clicked.

That was one way to look at it, Will thought. In compliance with the comparison, he tried to tip the puzzle pieces out of the box and start again from the beginning, see the origin.

"Yeah but, where are the corners?" Price asked with as little tact as the two normally showed for murder and mutilation.

"What?" Zeller asked, looking at him with a frown.

"My mum always said," Price explained, "start a jigsaw with the corners."

"Uh," Zeller shrugged, looking back to the totem, "the heads are the corners I guess?"

"You've got too many corners," Beverly said, making Will look to her as she, in turn, looked at the totem; she had picked up on it too, "seven graves, way too many heads."

Will continued to stalk around the structure, beginning to change his tack, looking at it half objectively and half subjectively. The older bodies were desiccated, turned to skeletons half draped with shreds of skin, while the limbs of others, the more recent, appeared to have the consistency of old leather but the shiny quality of an insect exoskeleton. These are those who were buried, Will thought as he resisted the sudden urge to reach out with his gloved hand and touch the browned skin of an arm just to gauge its texture. He reacted to the thought quickly, worriedly, curling his fingers into fists as if they had somehow betrayed him. He took a quick breath and kept walking, a little horrified that the thought had even crossed his mind. The ache along his shoulders did not ease, but the cold air seemed to have taken the edge off of his headache, slightly. The light of the snowy landscape was still abrasive against his eyes, itchy, burning, but he could handle that. So the skeleton at the bottom, he moved on just to keep his mind thinking, it's at the base of the totem, it is the foundation. It must have been earlier, far earlier. Earliest.

"The headpiece appears to be the only recent victim," Jack said as Will walked past him, confirming his suspicions, "the others are years, even decades old. And we know that seven of the bodies were buried out here."

"Whoever dug them up knew exactly where they were buried," Will said, speaking in a tone which was partly for those listening but mainly for himself as, slowly, he began building a picture of events in his mind.

"I guess it wasn't enough for him to kill them once," Jack sounded mildly disgusted; in the way he put it Will thought it sounded as if Jack believed the victims had suffered not one death but two, "he had to come back and defile his victims."

Will disagreed, "These graves weren't desecrated, Jack," he said as he slowly came to the realisation, looking up at the structure, taking in feet and hands and skin stretched torsos, until his eyes came to rest upon the closed-eyed face of the man at the top, "they were exposed."

Someone wants their work to be seen, Will thought as he stared, wants their accomplishment to be taken in, maybe even marvelled at. Or is this for someone specific? Is this a testament? Will wasn't sure if the look on his face had changed or whether Jack simply noticed that Will

was already absorbed by the crime scene, but suddenly Jack's loud voice rang out over the frozen landscape.

"Ok everybody lets go," he shouted, clapping his hands together, "let's clear the scene!"

He felt as if he were one of them as he turned and walked with the crowd of people leaving the scene behind; a momentary relief from the idea of his purpose. Yet his role was not to be like everyone else, something Will knew all too well but was beginning to resent more and more. The totem called to his turned back like a siren upon a rock. Will slowed his walk until he had stopped, his feet crunching against the thin layer of ice upon the ground. He turned, bringing the now empty area into focus. Everything began to fade into the background. Will removed his glasses. They were a barrier, a protection, no more. In order to see, *to see*, he needed to take the barrier down and let the darkness inside. He tried to ignore the pain in his skull as he focused on the evidence, focused on the picture, focused on the idea of viewing this creation with the same loving care as the person who made it would have done. Will closed his eyes and allowed the whispering voice to become louder.

On the stroke of one, he was alone. *A monument, a pillar, a landmark to be marveled at.* On the stroke of two, the equipment was gone and the area grew colder. *In a place I knew, a place that has meaning to me*. The stroke of three, the totem lay upon the ground, alone, its headpiece gone. *I erect this as a testament to my own domination over my past and my future.* By the fourth stroke Will felt his eyes jerk open followed by a swift inhalation of freezing air.

It was snowing, or had snowed not long after. Will knew it had been snowing because the tracks the killer had left had been covered by snow which had then frozen into ice. It was snowing. He looked down at the totem from where he stood upon the head of the slope, his unfinished creation alone on the frozen water's edge. No. No, not alone. *I planned this monument*, the voice said, *with precision.* Will walked forwards steadily, almost strutting. He looked down at the totem with a sense of pride and a feeling of accomplishment. This was his work. He had given so much of his time, so much of his life to building this memorial. *I collected all of my raw materials in advance*, the voice was starting to become familiar and yet unfamiliar. He looked down at his feet, where he knew he would find a large, limbless torso. *It has to be perfect, orderly*, Will hunkered down and took the frozen trunk in his arms, *I have taken so long in gathering, now it is time to build*, he lifted it with difficulty before placing it against the wood. *I position the bodies carefully*, the voice continued as Will began harshly strapping the torso to the totem, *according each its rightful place*.

The piece, the voice said but Will felt as if he were stepping in suddenly, correcting it, *the pieces disassembled.* He continued, wrapping the rope, fixing the arm to the wood, adjusting it with care. Will felt as if he looked up to the space before him on the beach more because he already knew someone was there more than through any sort of insight.

"*My latest victim I save for last*," he said, "*I want him to watch me work. I want him to know my design."*

The knife was in his hand as he walked forwards, stepping around previous victims in order to make way for the last he would ever take. Will reached out with his leg and kicked the terrified man onto his back, staring up at him like a frightened rabbit, mouth gagged, arms

and legs bound. He would have done this to keep the man's eyes on him, keep him watching, keep him in anticipation. He knelt down, thighs on either side of the man's hips as the victim began to struggle. Will ignored this, barely even registered it, in favour of placing the knife just below the man's sternum, putting his hand on the top of the hilt, and pushing. There would have been no hesitation, no struggle, that's not what this was about. The kill was enjoyable but not the most important aspect. The knife slid in with a satisfyingly soft sound, accompanied by the pleasurable widening of the man's eyes and the muffled and yet surprised grunt he made against the duct tape across his lips. Will let out a content sigh, relaxing back on his thighs as he let go of the knife and looked down upon the last puzzle piece, the last of his efforts. He drank in the sight of the tremor in the man's arms, the fading terror in his eyes, and watched him die, watched the lifeblood seep out from under him like a widening pool of dark water, stark against the pale sand. Will stood, taking a step back to survey his work.

The totem was erected. The headpiece took its rightful place. Will stared up at it like a loving father.

"This is my resume," he felt his lips move and his larynx vibrate, and Will knew that his voice had become the killer's medium, "this is my body of work. This is my legacy."

The sky was bright behind the fingertips of the dead man, straining out towards the water. Will continued to stare up at his creation even as his realisation of how far he had let the darkness in became disturbingly apparent. The blood pooled on the limbs, running over the bodies below and freezing as it went. It was with a sickening sense of closeness that the drip of blood fell against his cheek. Part of him wished to wipe it away, part of him wished to cherish it there.

Another part of him wished to know why he would even imagine that at all.

Eyes open.

A grey wall lay before him, a painting upon it.

Warm air all around him.

A dawning realisation of something very, very wrong.

He felt his eyes searching madly for the reality he was supposed to fall back to after he did this, after he let himself *imagine*. Where is it? Will thought desperately as his wild eyes scanned his surroundings and he felt his pulse quicken, *where am I*? Where is my *reality*?

"Will," a sudden voice from behind him, "I would say that you are most certainly late for your appointment."

He turned, mouth open to let out a stuttering breath before pulling in the next, to find the last thing he would have ever expected. Everything seemed to tip sideways and then right itself as Hannibal Lecter, dressed in a chocolate brown suit and matching waistcoat, looked at him from the doorway of his office with a slight amount of surprise and yet a seemingly welcoming glint in his eyes. Will stared at him, knowing he must have looked as lost as he felt. What is happening, what is happening, *what is happening to me*? Again and again and

again it rolled in his mind as Lecter's gaze became concerned and Will found he couldn't speak for the sudden fear blocking his throat. As if knowing that he was incapable of forming speech at that moment, Lecter simply opened the door he had been in the process of closing and gestured for Will to enter. He had never been more grateful to anyone than he felt to Lecter in that split second between feeling as if he were about to begin screaming and continue until he couldn't stop or simply lie down upon the floor and stay there until the world started making sense again.

The room was dim with light filtered through grey evening clouds but Will didn't take notice of the trivial matters. Instead he tried his best to form cogent thought as he walked across the floor. I was at the crime scene, the totem, the bodies, I was at the crime scene and then...

"I don't know how I got here," he said finally while Lecter removed his jacket; *oh god, oh god*, he thought again and again.

"Your car is outside," Lecter said as he returned from looking out of the window down into the street, ever rational and calm voiced, "so we know you drove."

"Wel...I-I was on a beach," Will needed to rebel against the idea of having driven there; how could I have *driven* if I don't even *remember*? "in Grafton West Virginia, I *blinked* and then I was waking up in your waiting room except," he could hear the hysteria, building, building, hear the pleading in his voice, "*I wasn't asleep*."

"Well, Grafton West Virginia is three and a half hours from here," Lecter said, folding his coat, "you have lost time."

Lost, lost, lost. Will lifted his hands and knew they were shaking, trembling even as he tried to ward off the idea which loomed in his mind.

"There's something wrong with me," he said, wanting it to come out as a deliberate statement of fact but instead it left his mouth as a lingering question; someone tell me I'm not mad, please, I'm not *mad*.

When he looked back to Lecter the man was set as a stark silhouette against the strips of bright light from the windows behind him. Will narrowed his eyes against the glare and felt the pain of his earlier headache returning full force. He clasped his hands together and yet still couldn't stop them shaking. Your mind is not your own, the voice spoke to him, your body will betray you.

"Will, look at me," Lecter said, watching him carefully, his tone cautious and yet gentle, setting Will's teeth on edge, "you're disassociating. It is something I have seen on many occasions in my patients..."

"But I'm not your patient," Will shot back, not entirely sure where the anger was coming from, "am I."

"No, you are not," Lecter agreed without hesitation, "but that fact does not mean my diagnosis is not true. This form of mental distress is a desperate survival mechanism, seen often in a psyche that endures repeated abuse..."

"No, no!" Will cut in forcefully, pointing at nothing as he continued to walk around the office, unable to keep still, "I am not abused!" the hysteria was taking over, making his voice tremble and his pitch waver.

"You have an empathy disorder," Lecter rationalised, making Will feel like throttling him, "what you feel is overwhelming you."

"I know, *I know*," Will mumbled and muttered, agreeing in order to pacify, wringing his hands.

"Yet you choose to ignore it," Lecter spread his arms like a disappointed parent, making Will's breathing go out of sync with his lungs, his chest convulsing involuntarily, "that's the abuse I'm referring to."

This is what he thinks of me? Will thought in angry disgust, This is what he sees me as? A victim of my own self abuse? And yet he happily sent me back out into the fray without a second thought.

"Whoa, whoa," Will separated his hands, trying to understand, "wh-do you want me to *quit*? You're the one who told Jack I was fit for active duty!"

"Because I believed you were," Lecter said in a marginally stiffer tone, a subtle change to his body language, showing a slight insult taken.

"And now?" Will asked even though he had his own answer ready, "Now you think I'm so far gone that I can't keep my own reality in focus."

"I see a man who allows himself to be so badly affected by his work because he believes it is the only way he can do his job," Lecter said; Will felt momentarily taken aback, mainly because Lecter was analysing him, something he did not do often. Lecter would question him, make him come to his own conclusions, but rarely did he ever tell Will what he was.

Will felt his indignation rise, even as his own want to scream for help became overwhelming, "I am good at my job, I *need* to be good at my job," he qualified harshly, "even if I know that it's not good for me."

"Well Jack Crawford gave you a chance to quit and you didn't take it," Lecter said, falling back to his psychologist's routine, "why?"

Don't question me, how dare you question me, how could you *ask me*..? Will felt his indignation rise to new heights and quickly focus upon the nearest person. He stared at Lecter as if the man had just asked him why you would bother to flip over a turtle lying on its back in the midday sun. "I save *lives*," he said as if that gave him the impunity to destroy his fragile sanity in the process.

"And that feels good?" to Will, at that moment, Lecter sounded like an alien, interviewing the inferior and puzzling race that inhabited the face of this earth.

"Generally speaking, yeah," he said, knowing he was being facetious, but the fear and the hysteria and the lack of understanding of why this was happening to him, all compounded into a twisting of his personality until he couldn't see beyond his own martyr-like thoughts.

"What about your life?" Lecter asked simply.

It was such a stupid question; that was what he thought at first, so much so he didn't quite understand it. His life? What did his life have to do with saving Abigail Hobbs? What did his life have to do with bringing solace to the families of the victims of the killers he had caught? What did his life have to do with those who were innocent? He was so wrapped up in his own fantasy, of a reality where he could justify his own fear through the lives of others, that he found himself asking:

"What?"

Lecter looked at him as if the answer were entirely obvious.

"I am your friend Will," Lecter elaborated very matter-of-factly, maroon eyes staring into his own, face open and honest, "I don't care about the lives you've saved I care about your life. And your life is separating from reality."

He did not so much sit down onto the couch he knew was behind him as he did very slowly collapse, folding down like a wooden puppet until the soft material was beneath him and he felt all of the energy, the hysteria, the defensiveness, drain from him like water down a plughole. Hands that no longer shook reached up to cover his face, shielding the world from view. Please, he wanted to say, please *help me*. He was too proud to let the words slip, instead allowing his hands to do so as they fell away from his face to hang down by his knees.

"I'm..." he felt his throat close up and refuse to allow him to vocalise his fears; Lecter watched him closely while Will struggled, finally managing to speak again, "I'm not able to control this...whatever is happening to me. I can't trust my own mind not to work against me. There must be something, there has to be *something else*."

"Will, do not rely on this being a physical problem," Lecter began, "don't look for solutions where there might not..."

"I am not *mad*!" Will shouted suddenly at the top of his lungs; at first he couldn't tell who was more taken aback, Lecter or himself.

The silence that followed seemed to ring. Will brought his fingers to his mouth and smoothed them over his lips before placing his palms together. You have to calm down, he told himself sternly as he looked to his right, looked to the crimson coloured wall and tried to use it as a reference point, if you don't calm down you'll only make this worse. He could see Lecter walk to his desk in his peripheral vision, his movements calm and regular. It was only as he tried to calm himself down that he realised the irony of his current situation was that the office he had 'awoken' outside of was Lecter's at all. Of all the places I could have run to what on earth brought me*here*? The one place I've been avoiding like the plague.

Will returned his gaze to the front, seeing Lecter writing something down in his small, leather notebook. He decided to fixate on something else, something worse. If thoughts of his mental state were terrifying him why not distract himself with something he simply didn't want to deal with instead? It was the best of a bad bunch yet, at that point in time, Will would take anything over dwelling on whether or not he was a lunatic.

"Why did you tell Jack Crawford I was fit to return to the field?"

"Perhaps I should answer your question with one of my own," Lecter said succinctly, placing his pen down and looking at Will intently, "why did you purposefully miss your last two appointments with me?"

"I would have thought the answer to that was pretty obvious," Will said with a heavy helping of derision, mainly aimed at himself.

"Perhaps the answer isn't as obvious as even you think, Will," Lecter said with a very slight nod of his head and the barest hint of upturned lips.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Will snapped out; he instantly regretted it, the returning headache and his own hyped up anxiety gnawing at his frayed nerves. He licked his lips and avoided Lecter's gaze. He decided this masquerade was no longer worth the effort and cut to the end of the chase, trying to miss out the part that scared him the most, "About the room, I'll pay for the damage."

"That was hardly the most concerning issue," Lecter said, his look shifting to that of disapproval as he leaned back against his desk, "I tried to call you because I was concerned for your mental state. You did not pick up or reply."

"Yet you told Jack..." Will started, swiftly cut off.

"I told Jack what my honest, professional opinion of you was," Lecter said.

" 'Was'?" Will asked, finally making eye contact with the man once more.

"Yes," Lecter said, "because now I see that this goes far beyond nightmares and sleepwalking. I know now that you need my help more than you will ever admit."

"Trying to say I'm evasive now?" Will said tightly.

"Only pointing out that this is twice now that your wandering feet have brought you to me," Lecter said, eyeing him curiously, "and I take that as a sign of a subconscious plea for assistance."

"What do you mean twice?" Will asked; in that second he knew, he *knew* what it meant, but having it vocalised by someone else only made it easier to deal with.

"My apologies," Lecter said with a small frown, "I assumed that you remembered that morning, but then I could be mistaken."

"I..." the opportunity dangled before Will like a ripe peach; he could claim amnesia, lost time, and allow his sickness to swallow that incident along with all the other memories it had stolen from him. Yet, as Will looked at Lecter, stark in light, he felt it would only be disingenuous to do so. Rude, somehow. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, looking to the desk as he spoke, "I remember waking up."

There was an odd pause; odd because Will was sure that Lecter was still watching him and yet did not speak. Is he waiting for more? Will wondered, feeling his heart begin to beat slightly faster, his headache pounding with every rush of blood. I don't have much more to give, he thought frantically. He reached up and tried to soothe the building pain with harsh rubs of his fingertips against the sensitive flesh.

"Do you have any aspirin?" he asked, nice and neutral.

He heard the distinct sound of a drawer opening and the telltale noise of pills rattling in their plastic casing. He looked up to take the pill bottle, tipping out two and swallowing them dry. He could tell Lecter disapproved, his stare making him feel self conscious and indignant all at once. What? He wanted to ask, What do you want from me?

"Tell me," he asked suddenly.

"About what, Will?" Lecter asked. It was somewhat worrying to Will that he could read Lecter as well as he could, or as well as he thought he could. The man's eyes, previously irritated, now appeared...interested, hungry, though barely anything had changed upon his face. Will continued regardless.

"About what happened," Will said, even though the words stuck in his throat, forcing him to dig them out, "I don't...remember anything between walking up the stairs that night and then waking up the next morning."

"I see," Lecter said, his curiosity seemingly piqued, "I thought that your avoidance of me and missing your meetings could be attributed to your behaviour that night, but I wanted to be sure."

"You wanted to be *sure*?" Will asked angrily, even though the real question he was desperate to ask was 'my behaviour?'.

"Forcing you to confront your own lack of control would not have been beneficial," Lecter said, pushing away gently from the desk and taking two steps towards Will; he found himself sitting up straighter although Will couldn't fully understand the fight or flight reaction that was flaring up in him, "I wanted you to confront this on your own terms. It seems, however, that your subconscious mind has solved that problem for you by bringing you to me, as I believe it did that night."

Taking a moment to process that information, heavy and barbed as it was, Will could only come to one conclusion.

"You think I sleepwalked into your bed," he said deadpan, depersonalising the idea.

"I cannot think of any other explanation," Lecter said, tipping his head curiously, "unless you can further enlighten me?"

"Then you woke up and I was already..." Will cleared his throat, ignoring Lecter's question.

"Yes," Lecter said, making Will's tension ease slightly, "when I awoke you were already in my bed. You were unresponsive when I tried to wake you but, on checking your pulse and breathing, you were stable. I had no cause for concern."

It was all far too easy, that was what Will thought as they discussed what they both assumed he had done, it was all too simple to understand that this was now normal for him. Will sleepwalked down roads at night, Will sleepwalked onto the roof of his own house, Will sleepwalked into the beds of his friends after destroying their property. This isn't who I am, Will fought against the idea, I am in control. I have to be. He felt trapped inside his own skin, his body ruling his mind rather than the way it ought to be.

"*How*?" Will asked, shaking his head, standing just so he could put some distance between them again, "How could you have no concern after you saw what I did? I can't control myself, my memories are fragmented, I can't tell what's real and what's not! God dammit, I tore your bed apart and I don't remember a thing. I can't...I shouldn't be able to..." Will cleared his throat, feeling like he was retreading old ground.

"There are only so many times you can say this to yourself, Will," Lecter said, "before you realise and accept the true cause of your illness."

He didn't reply. Will ground his teeth and tried to calm himself down. Everything had come out at once, so much so that it was difficult to get a handle on it. He was stalwart that he was not mad, yet his symptoms said otherwise. He was resigned to his current state even though he also feared it would interfere with his ability to do his job.

He was friends with Hannibal Lecter, yet there was an underlying resistance there that spoke too much of instinctual caution on his part.

"I understand why you are resistant to this diagnosis," Lecter said, a shortness to his tone as he walked to the chair where he had placed his jacket and picked it up; Will took that as a sign that Lecter wished him to leave, "but once your appointment gives its own analysis, I am sure things will be much simpler."

"That's one way to put it," Will said.

"Please, do not be flippant," Lecter said; bizarrely, Will felt an acute stab of shame at his behaviour, "I am worried about you Will. You empathise so completely with these killers Jack Crawford has you chasing that you lose yourself to them," Lecter walked forwards to stand by the doorway and put out the overhead light, "what if you were to lose time again and hurt yourself? Or someone else?"

A pain that came from the inside, mental not physical, blossomed in Will's mind. His greatest fear, the one he would not even speak of, reared its head and leered at him though Lecter's words. The idea of being those who he imagined when he reconstructed a crime scene made

him feel physically sick. More than that, Will shook his head as he couldn't stop the thoughts from running forwards without him, imagining if it were true, if he could would he go that far? It ended in a black place, with a hidden part of him smiling out from behind his nausea, making him perversely relieved. No, he thought as he stared a hole in the doorframe, walking to the doorway without another word, just no.

By the time he stepped outside the sun was setting, the sky alight with reds, purples and browns smudged down into a thin strip of bright gold barely visible at the end of the street. Will found himself waiting as Lecter locked up his office and walked down the stairs, pulling on his leather gloves as he did so. The cold air relieved some of the blank panic he had fallen into. He breathed it in until the inside of his nose stung, letting it out as a stream of milky breath into the cold air.

"You won't need to take anything before your MRI, it's just a scan," Lecter said, clearly understanding that he would get no answer to his question, "but you should have someone with you, just in case."

"I read the pamphlet," Will said, putting his hands in his pockets when he realised he couldn't find his gloves; there was a short silence before Will looked up to find Lecter watching him blatantly.

"You have someone to go with you?" Lecter asked.

Will couldn't help feeling insulted at first, quickly replaced by embarrassed realisation. He hid it beneath a calm confidence which he pulled up from his reserves.

"I assumed you would be coming," Will said, "Dr. Sutcliffe is your old friend, right?"

"Old colleague," Lecter corrected, clasping his hands together softly before him, his gaze steady, making Will nervous, "if you want me to accompany you I can make the time."

Forcing me to say it, are you? Will thought caustically. He reigned the feeling in. What is there to get defensive about, he asked himself, he's your friend, isn't he? Who else are you going to ask? Alana was out of the question, for reasons he'd rather not think about. Jack had enough to deal with already, what with his wife's cancer, he didn't need to babysit Will on top of that. He didn't think he knew Beverly well enough yet to ask for this kind of favour and, truthfully, he'd rather keep this away from work as much as possible. One thing he felt he could count on Lecter giving him was privacy at least.

"Thanks," Will finally acquiesced, nodding and chewing at the inside of his lip, "I'd really appreciate it."

"Of course," Lecter smiled, "I will pick you up at ten."

Control freak, Will wanted to say. Instead he said, "That'll be enough time?"

"More than enough," Lecter said, "no harm in being early."

"Right," Will conceded, allowing Lecter his power trip; Will guessed that it was perhaps his passive aggressive way at getting back at Will for being rude. The thought almost made him laugh even though he knew it shouldn't; the laughter would have been more hysterical than he was willing to deal with, "ten it is then."

Winston began to bark even before Will heard the telltale sounds of the approaching car. Will told him to be quiet, "Stop it, Winston! No barking", forcing the dog down into intermittent growling, threatening into a yelp every now and then. Will checked his pockets for the fourth time, keys, wallet, specs, aspirin, before the knock came at the door. That had all the dogs up from their beds or running in from other rooms. Will had to push his way through and harass them backwards before he could even get it open.

"Hey, no Buster!" Will said as the small dog rushed forwards, heedless of his words, and sat wagging his tail at the feet of the man standing there; Lecter looked down at the small dog with amusedly raised eyebrows, "sorry," Will said as he managed to get the door fully open, "he likes to jump on people."

"You are too soft on him, I'm sure," Lecter said as he pulled off his right glove before squatting down to let the small dog sniff his hand before petting him, "you remember me, little one?"

"I think they all do," Will said wryly as he looked behind him to find the rest of his pack sitting attentively, their tails wagging across the floor. Sasha, the bernese mountain dog, even lay down and shuffled forwards comically on her paws. Will laughed softly, shaking his head, "what did you feed them when I was away?"

"Pork sausages," Lecter admitted, "and dog food."

"Were the pigs fed on crack?" Will asked jokingly as Lenny, the tan pitbull cross, walked forward a few feet to sit at Will's side and look expectantly at Lecter with large eyes he used for begging.

"I should certainly hope not," Lecter said as he stood up, making Buster whine while Lecter feigned a curious look, "unless that could attest to their price."

"No wonder I've had them turning their noses up the normal stuff," Will said, screwing his eyes up a little and smiling sceptically, "also, did you just make a joke?"

"It has been known to happen," Lecter inclined his head marginally to the left, his eyes distinctly mischievous; or maybe only distinct in someone who knows what to look for, Will thought.

Will licked his lips and, once more, neurotically patted down his pockets, "alright, be good, I won't be long," he said to the dogs, ushering Buster back inside before closing and locking the door.

He wouldn't say he cared a lot about the status of a car, his own did him fine, got him from A to B, was old enough that he could still tinker with it if he needed to, or simply wanted to.

Yet, Lecter's Bentley was a magnificent specimen, it would be a shame to lie about it. He sank into the passenger's seat and instantly felt like falling back to sleep. Lecter entered and sat down behind the wheel, turning the car on with a subtle purr of the engine. The stereo burst into life, making Will look up in surprise. Lecter was quick to turn it off, flicking another switch on the dashboard to turn on the heating.

"Faure?" Will asked, recalling the song that Lecter must have been listening to as he drove to Will's house.

"Yes," Lecter said as he buckled his seatbelt, "something I used to enjoy. A friend recently gifted me a cd collection of his work."

"Don't turn it off just for me," Will said, sniffing as the air conditioning began to dry up his nose, "I like it."

"The self-proclaimed man of no taste?" Lecter asked, continuing his almost baffling humorous streak; Will couldn't help but smile widely, a small, stifled laugh escaping his lips.

"Whiskey and music are two very different things," Will said with a shrug as Lecter flicked the stereo back on, turning down the volume. A swathe of beautiful voices rang out, with a soft accompaniment of violin.

'*Sanctus dominus – Gloria...* '

Will strapped himself in as Lecter backed down the path and turned the car around, barely feeling the bumps in the road beneath the fat tyres. The voices rose in triumph, a rising blare from the horns.

'*Hosanna in excelsis*'

They drove in silence but for the music, the desolate winter scenery of Wolf Trap passing by the windows. Will was glad for their comfortable lack of communication, it gave him time to collect his thoughts and watch the piled snow at the sides of the road rush by. The uplifting voices gave way to a lone voice, a strong but sad melody befitting of a requiem. Will allowed it to wash over him as he closed his eyes.

Walking into the room Will instantly felt his shoulders tense up, his eyes leaping around the walls. Pictures, huge and monolith-like, stood around the stainless steel tables. He felt a need to hold his breath as he walked in, the lab quivering with movement as pack after pack of plastic wrapped limbs were brought in by unknown lab techs and placed on the pile forming behind Zeller and Price. Will felt the panic rising, the distinct feeling of suffocation, and pushed it down like rubbish into an already full bin, compounding, compressing, but still laying underneath and rotting.

He was worried that others would be able to smell the lie behind his forced calm. He was worried that he had to put on the smile at all. Before Jack, who had asked him blatantly, "Is there something wrong?", he had literally grinned and bore it. A fractured, flaking grin that he was surprised worked at all. Everything seemed to distort, pulling back from time and

leaving him out of the memory. It was disorienting to feel the memory turn to the dream, as if they were both one and the same.

He thought he saw Jack Crawford standing over him, looking down, a stark outline in front of the ceiling. He could feel cold metal at his back and the heavy breathing of an animal off to his left. It snorted, hooves clopping against the hard floor. He wanted to look, he wanted to see, but he couldn't move. Jack picked up a small instrument and turned back to Will. It was as he saw the scalpel that Will realised exactly where he was.

"*Let's see what's inside that head of yours," Jack said with a wide grin, "who knows what sort of monsters will crawl out..."*

A hand shaking his arm. Will opened his eyes slowly and took a deep breath. No darkness, no Jack, no scalpel, no stag. The car had stopped and, when he lifted his head from the uncomfortable angle it had fallen to against his shoulder, he found they were in a small car park before a tall, grey building lined with windows which shone in the late morning sun.

"You have not been getting enough sleep," Lecter stated as Will finally came to himself, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes.

"I don't deal well with heat," Will said quickly, unbuckling his seatbelt, "that's all."

He left the car before Lecter could continue, although Will wasn't arrogant enough to think that Lecter would spend his days badgering him to tell the truth. He waited for the man to lock the car before walking with him up the steps. The building may have been private, obvious from the small car park itself, and only more so from the well dressed staff, the amount of tasteful potted plants at reception and the comfortable waiting area, but it still smelled of hospital. Will sat on his chair as if it were two sizes too small for him, his hands clasped together as he looked around the room. It was spacious, tastefully painted in cream and mint green, the chairs cushioned and yet elegant, with a bookshelf of modern and classic literature. No magazines on a coffee table for this place, Will observed wryly. The waiting room was empty but for two others, a short, stout man in his fifties wearing a grey sweatshirt and beige trousers which made him blend in with the furniture, and a woman the same age with curled, blonde hair and garish red lipstick. Will ignored their attempts to make eye contact and smile politely, instead looking at the floor.

"Mrs. Greenaway?" one of the immaculate nurses appeared at the door and smiled at the woman who stood with the man and followed her.

"You seem nervous," Lecter observed as the couple left.

"Could we not do this here?" Will asked, mainly because he was what Lecter conjectured.

The silence returned, except now Will knew it was flavoured by ruffled feathers and irritation. He wished he could be more accommodating but, considering the circumstances, he felt he didn't have the energy. He took time off of his work to help you with this, Will reminded himself, the least you could do is...

"Sorry," Will said, looking to his left where Lecter sat, watching him, "I just...I guess I am, a little."

"You have nothing to worry about," Lecter reassured him, "an MRI is a common, safe procedure."

"You know that's not the problem," Will said, giving Lecter a hard look.

"I know," Lecter said, giving one swift nod, "but this is the best thing for you. Whatever comes of this, we will get you the best treatment."

It was no nurse to come and greet them. Instead a doctor, white coat and all, appeared through the doorway with a bright smile and a look in his eyes that was far more for Lecter than it was for Will.

"Hannibal, how are you?" the man, who Will assumed must be Dr. Sutcliffe, shook Lecter's hand while the other simply viewed the man demurely, "It's been a long time."

"A lifetime ago," Lecter said, making Will look to him out of the corner of his eye; Sutcliffe appeared to shrug off the comment, "but you seem to have been doing well for yourself."

"Well, thanks," Sutcliffe said before turning to Will, "you must be Mr. Graham, pleased to meet you, I'm Donald Sutcliffe, head of Neurology."

Will nodded and tried to smile but it got lost in transmission, coming out as more of a twitch of lips. He avoided the man's eyes and blinked rapidly. He didn't offer his hand but Sutcliffe did not seem offended.

"Let's head up to my office shall we?" he herded them towards and elevator, "We can talk things through."

"We didn't find anything abnormal," Sutcliffe said as Will stared at the monitors, his brain outlined in healthy blue and white inside the scan, "no vascular malformations , no tumours, "the man slipped on his reading glasses and glanced down at his clipboard, "no swelling or bleeding, no evidence of stroke. Nothing. There's nothing wrong with you neurologically."

He had to close his eyes, even if just for a moment, he had to because he couldn't look at the man and swallow down the yell swelling in his throat at the same time. His brain simply couldn't process it. Nothing. *Nothing*. His words to Lecter an hour before swam back to him "*You know that's not the problem*'; and it wasn't. This was the problem, right here in front of him in the calm scans and the calm words of the doctor telling him he was fine.

Nothing.

Except it isn't nothing, Will thought as he opened his eyes again and looked to the man, is it. It can't be *nothing* because everything that has happened to me *has happened*. So that leaves

only one thing. He felt lightheaded but fought it back, his voice coming out in a blank monotone.

"So, what I'm experiencing is psychological?" he asked, even though for himself it wasn't a question.

He listened to the answer but didn't take much more in past "it can't pick up mental disorders". He nodded and blinked, "We'll do more scans, take some more blood samples," Sutcliffe said as if trying to placate his fitful silence, "but I think they'll prove to be just as inconclusive."

The doctor saw him out, leading him back to the elevator and calling it. He spoke in his calm voice continually until the doors dinged open.

"Hannibal is downstairs in the waiting room," he said, "I gave him my contact details for you, if you need anything before I see you next then please don't hesitate to call. I am very busy, you understand, but I'll do my best. I've pencilled you in for next Thursday at five."

"Thank you," Will said mechanically before entering the elevator.

He managed to wait until the doors were closed and he was moving before he allowed his composure to break. He could feel it in his chest at first, a heavy convulsion as he suppressed the sound trying to escape up through his throat. He opened his mouth and blinked his eyes but nothing came out but panted breath. He felt like he couldn't breathe, more and more as his eyelashes became wet and streaked the inside of his glasses with tears that had yet to fall. It was almost involuntary as his right hand flew to his mouth, stifling the sob. He felt a wet path across his left cheek. *Oh god*, he thought, *no, no, no*. He slumped back against the wall, opening his eyes to a world covered by a misty sheen. I wish I were dreaming, he thought desperately, I wish this wasn't real. *Please*, he pleaded with himself. He looked up at the shifting light behind the numbers indicating the floors as they passed. Nine, eight, seven. Will forced himself away from the wall and quickly pulled off his glasses, bunching up his shirt beneath his jumper and rubbing at the lenses until they shone. He wiped his eyes with a quick hand before putting them back on, trying to slow the convulsions in his chest, making his breaths shake as he pulled them in and let them out.

He stood for a good two minutes in the corridor until he felt he might look less like he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Yet, when he walked into the waiting room all his preparation seemed for naught when Lecter said:

"Are you alright, Will?" Lecter's mild frown and concerned air made Will feel like screaming.

"Mmm," he hummed out while nodding, "just tired. I have to head off now, though, I need to prepare for my lecture at three. Thanks for bringing me in, I appreciate it, really."

"Will..." Lecter began, his frown deepening.

"Bye," Will smiled irrationally, turning it into more of a grimace as he turned and left, shrugging into his jacket and all but striding out of the medical centre.

There was a vivid memory he had, one which he could always remember so clearly perhaps for the heightened emotions associated with it. He was young, he wanted to say eleven, maybe twelve. He had fought with his father, something they did not do often, his father bad at dealing with emotions and Will still too young to understand how his own deficiency worked. *'She didn't care about you, she didn't care about either of us! The faster you understand that, the faster you can be normal like the other kids!".* The kids at his new school had been teasing him about not having a mother. He had run from them. His father lashed out when he asked about her. He had run from him too. He remembered the darkness and chill of the night air. He remembered sitting in someone's back garden down the street while his father stormed passed, looking for him, cursing under his breath. He remembered the bright stars in the clear sky but no moon. The wetness of the grass beneath his crossed legs and the large rhododendron bush behind him soaking into his clothes.

At that point in his life he had never felt less normal, something he had been forced to come to terms with over the years that followed. He had always clung to that. I am normal, he had thought as he stared up at the sky, just a different kind of normal. Only, Will thought as he finally ground to a halt, standing in the middle of a narrow, suburban street, shaking, only not any more. He knew Lecter was there even before the man walked around to stand in front of him because he had heard him approach, all careful footsteps and caution. That's what I am now? Will thought, someone to be cautious of? Someone to treat like a broken piece of china that will never go back together quite right? Is that what I am now? *Broken*?

"Come back to the car," Lecter said, placing his hands on Will's shoulders, "I'll drive you home."

"I can't..." Will's throat closed up, choking the rest of his words into nothing as he tried to stop shaking; in truth, he hadn't even been sure what he was going to say anyway, "I...*can't*..."

"We need to talk this through," Lecter said reasonably, "but not here. I can take you anywhere you like, just let's get you somewhere warm, I think you may be going into shock."

No, no, no, was all he could think, *no, no, no.* He shook his head violently, making the world sway and his eyes feel like rolling back in his head. When his knees buckled Lecter caught him, strong arms wrapping around his torso, lifting him back onto his feet. Will closed his eyes and couldn't stop the tears from pouring down his face. He lifted his shaking arms and clung to Lecter's long charcoal grey coat. A hand appeared at the back of his head, making a soothing motion down across the back of his neck, repeating it again and again until Will could no longer contain his grief. His breaths came as intermittent stuttering gasps. He shook his head tightly, feeling the soft material rub against his damp face.

"It's alright," Lecter was saying, "you are allowed to be upset."

"That's not..." Will found it difficult to talk, his sentences fragmented, "...there was...I don't..."

"Please, Will," Lecter's voice was soft, reassuring, "let me take you home."

The drive back was just as quiet between them, only now Will did not have the luxury of sleep. He could not bear the thought. Instead he sat back in his seat, which Lecter had adjusted without comment to allow him a more comfortable angle, and stared once more out

of the window. Everything was the same, everyone on the streets were bundled in large jackets, hats and scarves, the buildings were still grey and red and brown, the snow was still packed against the pavements and up the sides of the farm fences. He felt the warmth of the fans blowing warm air onto his chilled body but wasn't fully aware that he was freezing. Nothing has changed, he tried to tell himself.

Nothing. Ironically the word held so much meaning for him now that Will felt like avoiding it. He allowed Lecter to open the door for him and lead him to his front door. Will fished for his keys but dropped them when he tried to unlock the door. He closed his eyes and heard Lecter pick them up, turning the lock until it clicked. He heard the familiar scampering of paws and whining, a few barks from Winston. Will allowed Lecter to slip his arm around his waist to keep him steady as they entered, pushing in past the dogs as they crowded them.

"Sit," Lecter said authoritatively; Will was amazed by how quickly most of them did, only Buster and Sascha still standing.

He would have gone for the sofa in the living room, but Lecter led him to the bedroom. He was sat down on the bed and Lecter helped him out of his jacket.

"I can do it," Will said, noting with worry that his speech was slightly slurred.

"Alright," Lecter said, standing up and removing his coat, turning to drape it carefully over the back of the chair at the right of the doorway; he looked around the bedroom and ran his hands over his immaculate suit. Will couldn't help but stare at him. He looked so out of place in the small cottage and yet he didn't look haughty. Instead he seemed...normal. Will frowned as he managed to finally slip out of his jacket. Lecter noticed this and picked it up, placing it onto the chair with his own, "I'll make us some tea."

Lying down didn't seem like the best of ideas but Will did it regardless. He felt exhausted, as if he had run for miles without stopping, his head light, his limbs shaky. I can't be like this, he thought as he curled up onto the bed on his side, heedless of his shoes, I'm overreacting. This is just...*You're in shock*. Lecter's voice had been calm and strong when he said it, believable. Am I? Will thought dazedly, or is this just an elaborate delusion? What if none of this is real? What if this is all a nightmare? Maybe...maybe I'll wake up...

Wetness against his hand. He looked down and swallowed, his foggy eyes coming to rest on Lenny as the tall dog lapped at his upturned palm. Despite the shock, the pain, the grief and the disappointment, Will smiled tiredly. Lenny continued his work until he was satisfied and Will's hand was thoroughly 'clean'. What was it Lecter had said? *Unconditional love*. Will bent his arm at the elbow, bringing his hand up to stroke the dog's head, making Lenny close his eyes and lean his head down onto the bedcovers.

"Thanks buddy," he said softly as he scratched behind the dog's ear.

A few minutes later Lecter returned with a teapot which he placed onto the small nightstand, leaving to return with two mugs. Lenny looked around at the tall man as if expectant of an answer. When Lecter simply patted his leg, Lenny stood up slowly and followed the man to the dog bed at the end of the room and lay down. Will watched as Lecter continued to walk around his house as if he simply belonged there. He sat up unsteadily and leaned against the

wall, the windowsill digging into his shoulder blades. He took the mug of tea offered and sipped it. Lecter looked around for a place to sit and seemed to decide that the bed was the only place left. He sat on the side and drank his tea. Will held it in his hands until the heat was too much to bear. He screwed up his face and once more took the mug by the handle, feeling the heat dissipate from his skin. There was a hysterical bubble of laughter lying under the surface of his dazed calm, but Will didn't want to ratify its existence by letting it out.

"So, are you going to say it?" he asked, staring into his tea.

"Excuse me?" Lecter said.

"I told you so?" Will was grim even as he made the joke, knowing it wasn't much of one.

"Will, do you want to talk about what Dr. Sutcliffe gave you as a diagnosis?" Lecter expertly avoided his barbed comment, turning from his perch on the bed so as to look at Will as he spoke.

"You..." Will frowned, looking away towards Lenny, lying with his head over the edge of the bed; the dog caught Will's stare and wagged his tail half-heartedly, "I thought you already knew."

"You are not my patient," Lecter said reasonably, "therefore I am not privy to your medical information, nor should I be unless you wish it. I stayed in the waiting room until you returned."

Will ran his teeth over his bottom lip and took another sip of his tea. Always making assumptions about him, aren't you, Will thought, and yet none of them stick. Why are you the only person I feel I can read and yet can't predict? The thought of telling Lecter what Sutcliffe had said only made him feel worse. You can't run from this, he told himself.

"He said..." Will paused, using it as an excuse to take another drink, "he said that there were no neurological abnormalities. No bleeding, no swelling, no tumour."

He avoided saying 'nothing'.

"I see," Lecter nodded, leaning forwards to place his mug onto the nightstand beside the teapot; Will felt as if he were observed half as a friend and half as a specimen. He pushed the thought away hurriedly as Lecter continued. Paranoia, that's what it is, isn't it.

"He said he wanted to do more scans," Will said quickly, "and blood tests."

"Oh," Lecter said, looking at him expectantly, "did Dr. Sutcliffe seem hopeful?"

It felt embarrassing more than anything to shake his head. Trying to cling to any hope that this isn't real, he thought, that won't get you anywhere fast will it. He too put his mug down on the nightstand.

"Well then," Lecter said, looking to the doorway as Winston and Sasha both walked in, the former trying to jump up onto the bed before he was stopped by Lecter's soft push; Winston sat at the side of the bed instead, watching the two, while Sasha plodded to her bed with

Pugsley, Buster and Lady in tow; once all of the dogs were settled, Lecter continued, "I have a proposal for you."

"A proposal?" Will frowned even as he knew his desperation seeped through into his stare.

"I want you to formally register as my patient," Lecter said, "so that I may treat you properly. If this is indeed a mental illness, I believe I would be the most qualified to take care of you. And also," Will had opened his mouth to speak but closed it as Lecter continued, "I do not need you fighting me on treatment. I know how wilful you are but I only want what is best for you."

"Sounds like you already have a diagnosis," Will said, twining his hands together.

"I have my suspicions, but I will not go ahead with anything further without proof," he said.

"I haven't said yes," Will clarified.

"Then you refuse?" Lecter asked.

This time closing his eyes didn't help. You nearly broke down in the damn street, he felt like shouting at himself, you're so fucking delusional that you believe that you killed people who are already dead, you see and hear things that *are not there*. And here is help, literally gift wrapping itself for you and you want to refuse it because of what? Pride? Arrogance? *Fear*? He's your best friend and he wants to help you, that's what normal people do. Will opened his eyes and looked at Hannibal.

"No," he said, "no I...I want to. I do. I want to get better, I don't want this anymore. I want to be..."

"Don't think about that right now," Lecter said, standing from the bed and brushing a few dog hairs from the leg of his trousers, "what I need you to do for me is rest. You've had a stressful experience and the shock will have taken a lot out of you. Once you have slept and thought this through we can talk about further tests."

"But," suddenly the rest of his day popped back into focus as he realised what was now going to happen, "I have a lecture at three..."

"I will call and let them know to cancel," Lecter said peremptorily.

"I can't just shirk my duties," Will argued, "I have a case, I'm working a case!"

"Will."

Almost the same tone that Lecter had used for the dogs and yet, even as Will bristled at the idea, he recognised the difference in the man's eyes. Lecter was not looking at him as a disobedient cur. His eyes were warm and yet tinged with concern. Will licked his lips and took a breath.

"I need you to calm down," Lecter said, reaching out to grip Will's shoulder reassuringly; Will found the action oddly intimate, "and listen to me. If I am correct in my diagnosis, the

stress which has caused you to fall into this psychosis has been caused primarily by your work for Jack Crawford. In order for me to make you well again, I will need you to do exactly what I say. Understand?"

"Yes," Will nodded, hating that he felt like a foolish child whenever Hannibal reprimanded him.

"Good," Lecter said, seeming mollified by Will's acquiescence, "then get some rest," he said as Will removed his shoes, "I will need you awake and alert later."

The words made him feel both anticipation and anxiety. Will shuffled under the covers and closed his eyes, wishing that this time the nightmares would not come.

Raison de S'inquiéter

Chapter Notes

Title translation: Reason for Anxiety

The gas station was small and new, the faint smell of varnish and wood shavings still hanging in the air. The brightly lit sign declared the extortionate prices for unleaded and the store boasted fresh coffee. Will stood outside to take the call, not wanting to have people hear him, or watch him, if he had to bring up work. Seemed too perverse to bring its stench onto the shiny floors.

"The tyre tracks haven't come back with anything conclusive yet," Jack's voice was slightly distant on the phone and drowned out by background noise, "but I'm hoping trace will find something to go on with the rope fibres."

"I'd check the staff too, Wells' home helps and the call out nurses," Will said, moving out of the way as someone walked past him, heading for the door, "I don't think this would have been a relative but it's someone who feels close to him. They'd have to have had privacy. So, yeah, that's where I'd start."

"Well you won't have to," Jack sounded pleased but Will could tell it was more for the fact of a killer caught than Will's ability to take time off, "not for a little while at least. I hope you have something relaxing lined up?"

"Heading to Occoquan," Will said.

"Bit cold for fishing."

"I know, yeah I know."

The warmth of the small store as he walked back inside should have been comforting but instead he found it suffocating. The harsh lights and the inane radio music nipped at his head. It was too early to eat. He grabbed a bottle of water from the chill cabinet and some salted peanuts. He resisted the draw of caffeine.

The lady in front of him in the queue bobbed her head to the music and hummed underneath her breath. She smelled of damp body odour and cigarette smoke. Will turned his head to the left and tried to drag in the scent of the fresh flowers in their stand while his mind ticked over.

"Gas too?" the cashier asked as Will fished out his wallet.

"Yeah, pump six," Will said distractedly.

"Which pump?" the attendant asked; he hadn't been listening, looking back at Will with impatience.

"Six."

The last thing he needed. Will watched the man as he rang everything through. Brash, hair gelled in a perfect curl at his forehead, eyes lazy but sharp, condescending. A youngest child, Will thought, with a sense of entitlement that probably made him a nightmare at home. He didn't bother to put Will's purchases in a bag and Will picked them up, one in each hand, leaving the few coins change on the newspapers for the charity box.

The inside of his car was serenely cold. He dumped the water and peanuts in the passenger seat and started the engine, pulling out onto the mainly empty road which would surely back up towards midday. As it was, at eight in the morning, Will didn't have to think about traffic and instead could focus on not thinking about anything. He flicked the radio on and tuned in to the news.

'*...will be cloudy with sunny spells, with highs of forty six around two pm but dropping to twenty five later tonight. So make sure to wrap up extra warm if you're out camping on the lake for the meteor shower later this week because it's going to be clear skies and a beautiful view...'*

The newscaster's voice shuffled into the background as Will stopped listening. He was heading away from Baltimore with every turn of the wheel yet he was tied to it, like a fish with a hook through its mouth. The pain was just as persistent. There was a sound in the back of his mind, like a half forgotten task, that played over and over again without his consent. *See, see...see*. Will grabbed the water bottle with his left hand and jammed the bottle between his knees, unscrewing it while he held the wheel with his right. He took a swig, the water achingly cold against his teeth and throat. Still it didn't wash the sound away.

See.

He hated that it was Hobbs' voice. A whisper shouldn't be recognisable, should it? He asked himself. Yet he always knew, was able to recreate that specific vocalisation. It called back the reek of blood, pints spurting out past his fingers, patches drying on his skin as his hands shook. Abigail's terrified eyes staring up at him while Hobbs, calmly insane, looked into his soul and saw something there it could speak to.

He wanted to close his eyes but couldn't while he still drove. Instead he took another drink. The sun came out from behind the clouds and Will lowered the sun visor. He chewed at the inside of his cheek and thought about better things, or tried to.

They'd found the totem raiser, or as Jack tried to put it Will had found him. He swore Jack did it to be antagonistic, yet always with a smile. He had told Jack, '*the evidence was already there, I just saw it a little faster*', to which the reply had been '*yeah, you mean all the evidence we found* after *we caught him*'. He hadn't known what to say to that so he had stayed quiet and, a few days later, put in for some leave.

Yet, he couldn't entirely untangle himself from the case; there were still some loose ends in his mind. Will was convinced that Lawrence Wells would have needed help to carry out his final display, was still convinced in fact. Jack wasn't so convinced but seemed to be humouring him with their continued search. Tyre tracks in the ice which they were tracing, which Will was sure could be the vehicle used to raise the totem. They didn't match Wells' car but they were fresh enough to be barely beneath the snow, perhaps placing the vehicle at the scene of the crime. As far as he was concerned Wells was a narcissistic psychopath very much capable of murdering for decades, but in his current state he would be surprised if he could dig through pack ice or rope together such a complicated design, let alone raise it up and make it stable.

Turn *off*, he thought in irritation. He attempted to turn his mind down by turning the radio up. Queen, Seven Seas of Rhye, blasted out as he wound the window down. The cold air flitted through the gap in the window with the sound of a boiling pot, bringing with it the smell of pine needles and wood smoke. He took the next left down into Fountainhead Park, paying the toll, and the car grumbled along the dirt track up towards the cabin. Jack had assumed too much when he said he wanted a holiday, but then Jack was sometimes blinded by success. Catching Wells had put him off his game. Will wasn't sure how he felt about deceiving him but, overall, he didn't think he could stand the stigma of him finding out.

His first stipulation in his agreement with Lecter had been strict privacy. The second had been that nothing went back to Jack. The third, consequently, had been that he could continue working while Lecter analysed him.

"I do not approve of that condition," Lecter had been sorting books on his shelf to make room for a stack of The American Journal of Psychology*, one hundred and nineteen to one hundred and twenty six, grey spines contrasting with the turquoise lettering.*

"I didn't think you would," Will said, "but I won't let this rule me. Just the hint of anything wrong in my head and Jack will pull the rug out. I don't want anyone to panic until this is...official."

"I had hoped to have thrice weekly sessions," Lecter pushed the books apart where he had made a gap. He turned to Will, "but I might have to revise that. I expected you to be free at any time."

"Even if I wasn't working, doesn't mean I would be at your disposal, doctor," Will had felt a little rankled as he walked around the balcony in Lecter's office, now clean of blood and broken glass, his hands in his pockets.

"If you think this treatment to be an inconvenience, then perhaps you should reconsider," Lecter had turned away to place the journals onto the shelf, his movements controlled.

"Treatment only comes when you find the problem," Will cautioned.

Lecter hadn't replied but that had only driven home the doctor's thoughts, or so Will thought. He had been tetchy that day, out of sorts. The case had been turning up baseless leads, nothing but misleading calls on the tip line and Jack had been throwing his weight around, making Price and Zeller themselves overly antagonistic. In all, what with Will's mental state

already on shaky foundations, it hadn't been a surprise to him that he had snapped open and let the vitriol pour out.

"Stop acting like you've already stamped me and shipped me out, will you?" he snapped.

"I have not labelled you, Will. I am concerned, however, about your inability to accept any truth I may posit and treatment I may give..."

"Think I'll be difficult just to spite you?" he nipped out.

"Yes," Lecter said candidly, turning to face him with a pile of six books in his hands, his maroon eyes sufficiently observant to put Will's back up.

A few choice words had followed, none of which Will was proud of. He had been forced by a guilty conscience to call back two hours later to Lecter's house and apologise. The reply had been calm and selfless, as always, and he couldn't tell if Lecter was just using his psychologist's manner with him in order to make him compliant. Since his appointment with Sutcliffe Will had been jumping between a depressing sense of acceptance and fits of denial. The denial was normally quickly nipped in the bud by his symptoms, as Will had taken to calling them. Two Advil later and he would swear to himself he was normal again, even if it was a lie. The aspirin no longer had any effect.

He woke two or three times most nights, from dreams that then blended into reality with such efficiency that he couldn't tell the two apart. Three nights ago he had dreamed of a massive cliff of ice, immense in its scale like the wall of a glacier. He had watched it from the beach, the frozen beach. He could feel the totem behind him more than see it in his mind's eye. Watched as a slab had cracked and fallen, plummeting down into the frozen water. The wave had rushed towards him with ineluctability, so much so that he had kept his eyes open and waited for it as it loomed over him, ready to wipe everything away. He woke as the wave hit, or so he had thought. Instead it had taken a baffling and terrifying twenty seconds to realise that he was still asleep as he felt himself swimming in freezing water as he lay in his bed, shaking, shivering. He had opened his mouth to scream but nothing had come out as he felt his body melting out, merging with the flood. Merging with the dark waters.

That's why I'm here, he told himself firmly as he drove through the forest. No more running. His hands tightened and relaxed on the steering wheel. He kept his eyes on the road even though he wanted to look through the trees and see the sunlight on the river. It had been Lecter's idea, a compromise of sorts; Will had been allowed to keep going with Crawford until his case was done in exchange for one week of relaxation, during which Lecter was to visit every day. Will had wanted to explain that wasn't really relaxation, but had thought better of it.

It hadn't seemed right, at first, to bother with the extra expense and the hassle. Renting out the cabin was just another way of keeping this separate in his head. Compartmentalisation. It was only a forty minute ride to Fountainhead from Wolf Trap. As far as Will was concerned, as he pulled up into the small parking area, it was just far enough.

There was a distinct smell of juniper in the air and damp vegetation from last night's rain. The cabin didn't look small, more comfortable. A small frontage with a porch and a couple of

chairs, pools of water on the seats. The door creaked as it opened. Will pocketed the keys and looked around. Decent sized living room with a dowdy couch and matching armchair, a small television and a kitchenette off to the left. He could see through to the bedroom. Double bed with floral pattern sheets to match the curtains. Will suspected plastic under-sheets and mothballs in the drawers. He checked the kitchenette; everything worked except the toaster. He retrieved his suitcase from the car, as well as the water and peanuts. After putting the suitcase in the bedroom Will found he had no inclination to unpack. He found himself sitting on the couch staring at the black screen of the television while he mechanically shovelled peanuts into his mouth, chewing them down before washing away the salty taste with the cold water.

He missed the sleepy snuffling from the next room. He missed Winston being the first awake, walking through to join him on the couch and sit quietly with his head on his knee. He missed the dogs; crowding him as he opened the cans for breakfast and excitedly wagging their tails as he opened the door to take them out. Walking alone was something he hadn't done in a long while. It was something he had actively avoided in fact. Taking the strays in had started innocently enough, feeding the ones that liked to join him on his nightly walks. They had stuck around, some even turning up on his porch when the rain was too heavy to stand. It wasn't until Sasha that he began actively adding to his family. He knew why Lecter had made him leave them but it still rankled. *Unconditional love*. Will was sure that Lecter wanted to see him at his most vulnerable; no support, no way to run. See how he handled the reality he was slowly slipping from. Will felt like telling him that he had spent the last five years actively avoiding that reality for a reason.

He was just glad Alana had agreed to take care of them without asking too many questions. Sometimes, he thought with a little guilt, she was too good to him.

See. The cabin was too quiet to drown out the persistent whisper. Will took a shower. The spray was weak and lukewarm but it made him feel marginally better. After pointlessly changing clothes out of the opened suitcase and finishing off his convenience store 'breakfast', Will took his fishing gear out of the car and placed everything but his kit bag and fishing rod in the long cupboard he found at the end of the hallway by the toilet. He spent the next hour cleaning his line and sorting his equipment. He found a basin in a cupboard under the sink, a half used bottle of Tide next to it. After half boiling the kettle he made a warm solution on the basin with the detergent and the set about unwinding the fly line from the reel with slow care. He sorted his flies while the line soaked, passing each over his fingertips delicately, careful of the sharp hook. He dried the line with a soft cloth, careful not to run it through too quickly and cause the friction heat to distort it. Then he cleaned the fishing rod with the soapy water before attaching the reel and tightening the drag.

Will spent the morning out in the flow of the river under the pale sunshine.

By the time he walked back to the cabin, three hours later, his car already had a friend. He had stopped to look at the Bentley for a full minute, unsure how to feel about the situation. Lecter hadn't given any time for his 'appointments' and, if this was anything to go by, it seemed he intended to simply turn up when he felt like it. That, coupled with the isolation of the place and the lack of company, even just the dogs, was entirely deliberate Will was sure.

He found Lecter sitting on one of the two porch chairs, stiff wood that didn't look particularly comfortable. His eyes were distant, staring out into the trees, but still sharp as if he observed everything before him. It took him a moment to realise why Lecter looked odd. He stood as Will approached, revealing a monotone outfit. Thick black coat, buttoned over what appeared to be a grey jersey underneath. Light brown trousers and black shoes. Will didn't think he'd ever seen the man not swathed in his uniquely understated yet flamboyant colour palate. He took a moment to draw a breath and shuffle his fishing rod from his right hand into his left while he searched for the key in one of his many pockets.

"You're early," he said when Lecter didn't speak.

"I don't believe I gave you a time," Lecter replied.

"...I guess a simple 'good morning' is out of the question then."

It wasn't often he was able to pull Lecter up for being rude. Will decided to take the opportunity, no matter how antagonistic it was. Will set about laying out his kit on the small table in the kitchenette while Lecter looked inside the fridge and poked about in the cabinets, glancing over everything with his hawk's eyes. Will emptied his cooler of the fish he had caught; two large bass, their eyes bright and gills deep red, mouths hanging open. He had caught others but thrown them back.

"I need to clean all this," Will said as he shrugged out of his sleeveless jacket and pulled off his hat; Lecter was taking off his gloves when he looked to him, "do you want anything to drink? There's tea I think. English breakfast?", something the previous resident must have left along with the few cleaning products.

"Please," Lecter said as he took a seat on the couch; for a few seconds Will was unable to control the smile on his face. It wasn't entirely pleasant considering it was mainly involuntary. He thought Lecter looked ridiculous against the old, threadbare material. Michelangelo's David in a Seven Eleven parking lot. He stopped himself as quickly as he could, refilling the kettle and switching it on. He started cleaning while it boiled. Lecter simply watched him, saying nothing.

The next two hours went by in a shifting experience of drudgery and the ephemeral. They started small, even though Will thought it was unnecessary. A series of perception tests, the Zöllner illusion, the Three Streams, the Rotating Wheels; he hadn't been able to see a few of them move even though Lecter told him they should have. He was asked to draw a clock face, to which Lecter did not visibly react when it was handed back. Will wanted to ask why, why, *why*, but kept his mouth shut. Part of him did not wish to know. He felt like he might be four years old again when he was asked to colour in a picture of a cat and keep within the lines. He had given Lecter a significantly unimpressed glance but complied nonetheless, taking the top off of the red felt tip pen.

"Is there anything you wish to talk about?" Lecter had asked when they were done.

"Would there be?" Will shrugged, "I'm just feeling a little...worn thin. That's all."

"You just finished a hunt for a vicious killer," Lecter reasoned, "I thought you might perhaps want to..."

"Not really," Will clammed up.

"Well," Lecter didn't seem impressed but neither did he force the issue, "I think that is perhaps enough for the first day then. I'll leave you in peace."

He walked Lecter to the front door and watched him get into his car. It had all seemed rather peremptory, his arrival and departure alike. It felt as if, for a strange few seconds, he was being left here in this place. Absurdly, he felt like waving goodbye. Will shook his head and walked back inside, his palms sweaty and his neck itching. He started gutting the fish for dinner later that evening.

The field was sunlit but dark, as if someone had turned the contrast up. All shadows pitch, all whites blinding. The flowers danced in an unknown breeze, the leaves flitting on the trees like a staccato beat. He thought he heard the cello vibrating through the blades of grass with every shuffle of the breeze.

Hummm, hummm, hummm.

It felt cold but he didn't cover himself. Instead he walked forwards to the idol at the centre of his world, his created world, and wondered at it. it stood tall, blocking out the harsh sun, creating pearlescent strips of sunlight as it cut against the sharp horns.

A totem of twisting bone, sharp antlers piercing the sky. Upon each set a dark haired girl, her skin brown and weathered, like parchment paper. It seemed to glow. Will looked at it as he would something divine. He could imagine the copycat fashioning this sort of masterpiece. Taking another's base murder and elevating it.

Then he could hear it behind him. *Clip, clip, clip, clip*. A snort as the stag shook itself. He could feel its heat, a spicy smell on the air. He looked at the taught skin on the idol and wanted to touch, he wanted to touch it but he couldn't bring himself to cross that line. A line drawn in blood. It was with a sense of relief and fear that he felt the stag nudge him forwards, its large nose pushing against the small of his back.

The skin felt warm under his touch, pulsing. It made his nerves tingle and the world around him seemed to vibrate in harmony. He wanted to see, he wanted to *know*.He swallowed, reaching up fitfully to grab hold of the hair covering the girl's face, hauling her head up by a fistful of raven locks. Will felt his heart beat triple time as he was faced with Abigail, grinning at him through cracking, tearing cheeks as the weathered skin split.

Hello dad

The next morning he didn't know how long he stood under the shower for but his toes were slightly wrinkled when he stepped out. No matter how much he had scrubbed at himself with the cloth the residue of the dream stuck to him like dust on wet glass. Even after he dried

himself he could still hear the running water, trickling down the back of his conscious thought. He checked the taps obsessively until it became worrying.

He took a trip to the nearest grocery store, a twenty minute drive, and bought some essentials. Milk, cornflakes, butter, bread; some sausages, onions, potatoes and stock cubes. A tub of salt, some boxed black pepper, a pack of bacon and a carton of eggs. Some more Advil.

Next he stopped by the outdoors shop in the shopping centre and grabbed a new fishing hat. His had shown a large hole when he'd worn it the day before, one around the seam that wouldn't benefit from patching. When he returned to the cabin he resisted the urge to phone Beverly at HQ to get an update on the tyre tracks. Instead he made himself a bacon and fried egg sandwich and then went for a walk through the woods.

It was cloudy, the sky overcast with long, grey, monotonous clouds which seemed to stretch on forever. A sullen contrast to the previous day's glorious sunshine. Will walked the prescribed trail and looked at the frozen mud, the frosted grass. The lake itself was encrusted with ice by the shoreline, small ice flows forming on the water. He walked down to the cold sand and listened to them screech and creak as they pressed against each other. He walked to the ranger's station but no one was in. By the time he got back to the cabin it was early afternoon.

The cabin was dim and lonely. He turned on the television for some background noise but soon it became nothing more than an irritating sound. He turned it off with a harsh snap of the power button and stood for a moment without purpose. With no focus his mind rushed off without him to the place it wasn't supposed to go. *Wells would have only trusted someone with the same proclivities, someone willing to show him what they were capable of. He was too careful to slip up at the last minute. Someone with clever fingers like his, a penchant for killing without remorse. A wolf in sheep's clothing.* He caught himself thinking too late and let out a sound of disgust. Will decided to read a book to pass the time and keep his mind occupied.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been stuck on page one hundred and forty five but he was hungry again by the time he heard a car roll up outside. Will folded the page in his book even though he thought it was pointless. He hadn't been enjoying it, just using it to keep busy. He stood up on stiff legs and turned the kettle on, waiting for the knock at the door.

"Good afternoon, Will," Lecter said with a vaguely pleasant visage; Will wondered if Lecter was simply messing with him or if this was all part of his 'treatment'.

"Yeah," he said as he stood away from the door and allowed the man to enter, "you too."

Will made tea. Lecter pulled out his leather notebook. It felt too close to déjà vu and yet not close enough. He rubbed at his head as Lecter began, trying his best to pay attention. First, just small talk. How was he enjoying some time off? Did he like the park? Had he gone fishing today? Then there was a series of yes or no answers which, as they went on, made Will increasingly uncomfortable. It became apparent quite quickly why Lecter had started with such neutral questions.

"Do you have trouble speaking the words you want to say," Lecter said in his usual professional tone as he read from his leather notebook, "or are able to speak but others have told you that what you say is incoherent?"

"No," Will felt a little better.

"Have you had the experience of being completely unable to speak?"

"Not really," he answered with little confidence, remembering his slurred words after his meeting with Dr. Sutcliffe.

"Do you see or hear things that other people cannot see or hear?"

"...yes."

"Do you sometimes have trouble distinguishing whether something you experience or perceive may be real or may only be part of your imagination or dreams?"

"Yes," his previous negations now counted for nothing.

They continued through what Will recognised as the STEPI until he felt a little sick. Mostly yes, some no, some not really; enough to score seventy five out of one hundred and fifty six. A significant enough number, Lecter told him. Will swallowed and sat back in the lone armchair, his hands outstretched on the arms, fingers curling and uncurling. He felt his breathing might be erratic but couldn't tell. He tried to focus on it but couldn't find the source. He swallowed again and rubbed at his throat with his hand.

"Are you feeling alright, Will?" Lecter asked calmly.

"No," Will thought it imprudent to lie, "I...I need some air."

Lecter didn't stop him. Will stood on the porch and took in deep lungfuls of air. His head felt as if it were swimming and his stomach roiled. He attributed it to panic more than anything else. Still, he fumbled in his jeans pocket for the strip of Meclizine he kept on him. They tasted dusty and bitter, the tang lingering even as he swallowed them.

I can't fucking handle this, Will thought desperately, I can't stand it. It was bad enough to have Sutcliffe give him the all clear, have Jack reinforce the idea that Will's affinity with the killers he sought was a boon, but this...he didn't want it, he didn't want to know. You need to hear this, part of him argued. I'd rather live in a hole in the ground and never speak to anyone ever again, another part spat back. Will felt the rough, rounded logs of the wall dig into his back as he leaned against them.

See. The word floated into his consciousness like a slick viper. Will felt his composure break as the voice seemed to speak to him. *You see*, *you always have*. He brought his hand to his eyes as he closed them, trying to hold the panic inside.

He brought his hand back down. Next thing he knew he was standing in front of a frying pan, holding the handle as three sausages sizzled happily inside. Will let go and started backwards, spinning his head to the left as the frying pan jumped to the back of the cooker. The windows

were closed but the curtains were still open, showing nothing but darkness beyond. Will felt his heart hammering in his chest, his eyes jumping from object to object. Oh god, he thought over and over, *why is this happening*? It took him a few minutes to find the phone in his worked up state. His fingers fumbled on the buttons but eventually it began to ring. He could feel his hands shaking as the phone picked up at the other end.

"Hello?" Lecter sounded tired.

"I...I don't..." his voice slurred and Will panicked, unable to get the words out of his mouth.

"Will? Are you alright?"

"Don't know," he managed, his hand going to his chest as it cramped, "can't remember. It's all...blank..."

"Calm down," even Lecter's soothing voice did little to help, "you sound panicked," Will could hear sounds in the background like rustling fabric, "can you breathe easily?"

"No," Will said as he tried to do so, shaking his head even though he knew no one could see it.

"How about your chest," sounds of keys jingling, "do you have any pain in your chest?"

"Yes," Will said, his voice distorted by his breathlessness.

"I need you to follow my strict instructions, alright Will? Listen to me carefully."

The next hour was surreal. Lecter told Will to turn out the lights and lie down on the floor on his side. Lecter's voice through the phone sounded higher than it did in real life, Will thought. Slowly it became soothing to listen to. He could hear Lecter leave the house as the sound through the phone expanded with background noises of wind and traffic, hear him enter his car as the door thumped shut and the engine started. Lecter did not stop talking to him. Will wasn't even sure what he was saying anymore. All he could hear was the voice. Smooth sounds sinking into his ear as he cradled the phone against his cheek. He could feel himself shaking but didn't know if it was from cold or his attack.

Everything slipped by him in a flowing river of soft words and ticking time. The darkness became comforting as he lay against the hard rug. *I'm nearly there, just stay calm and listen to my voice*. Afterwards Will couldn't have told anyone half of what Lecter said to him or, in the end, how the man got into his cabin without the key. All Will was aware of was feeling soft and pliable as Lecter lifted him steadily from the ground, first his torso with an arm around his back, and then an arm under his legs. The bed was soft against the skin of his neck and face, the sheets cold. A bedside lamp was turned on and the room illuminated in a flash of dim light.

Seeing the man there, it felt like no time had been lost at all. Somehow that made things worse. Lecter was dressed in what looked like pyjama bottoms and his black coat. He wasn't wearing any socks with his shoes. Will felt like a fool as the man hunkered down beside the bed and reached out to feel Will's forehead.

"You're not hot," Lecter said, his voice still tired, "let me see your eyes."

"I left the stove on," Will managed to say quietly as Lecter held his face and observed him.

"I will see to that," Lecter said, "right now I need you to do your best to remember everything that you can about what just happened, alright?"

Will felt like telling him that there wasn't much point in holding out hope for that. He closed his eyes as Lecter left to deal with the stove. This is too much, he thought to himself, this isn't me. I can't be *this*. I am not mad. His symptoms mocked him from their dark recess in his brain, locked away with all the other defects. He wanted to sleep but forced himself to stay awake. It was as Lecter returned that he realised how hungry he was. Lecter sat down on the edge of the bed and turned his torso towards Will. His face was half illuminated, half cast in shadow, hair slightly tousled as if he had simply run his hands through it rather than use a comb.

"Tell me Will," he said, "what happened?"

"I lost time," Will said, feeling a grating sense of irritation as he added, "again."

"When did this happen?"

"It was...it was before you left," Will admitted, "I had gone outside to get some air."

"Yes, I remember," Lecter nodded.

"Then, well, that's the last thing," Will said, his speech lethargic even as his mind raced, "I went outside, I took some Meclizine..."

"I thought I asked you about your medication," Lecter frowned, "you did not mention antiemetics."

"They're over the counter," Will said, "I didn't think it was important."

"I need you to tell me everything," Lecter said, "and not lie to me. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Will said strongly, "I understand, and I'm not lying to you. I swear," there was a sudden need to plead with him, promise that he wouldn't mess up again.

"Alright," Lecter said, nodding slowly, "then tell me what is the next thing that you remember?"

"I...I was cooking dinner," Will said, blinking, his heart still thudding in his chest, "but I don't remember coming back into the house, or you leaving. I...I don't remember *anything*."

A hand on his shoulder. Will felt his panic subside slightly while a whole new set of neuroses flared up. He wanted to back away from the touch just as much as he wanted to lean into it. He closed his eyes and felt his face screw up. He felt like crying and screaming all at once. When he opened his eyes again Lecter had a pill bottle in his hands which he was unscrewing.

"What are they?" Will asked, his voice hard, loud and accusing.

"It is something I think will help," Lecter said unhelpfully as he carefully shook out two small, white pills.

"Tell me," Will said harshly as he pulled himself up slowly against the headboard until he was almost sitting up, "I won't take it until you tell me!"

"It's clozapine," Lecter admitted.

"Oh *god*," he couldn't stop himself from sobbing out, his voice hoarse in anger and pain, "fucking anti-psychotics? Are you kidding me? Is this fucking *real*?"

"Will, you are hysterical, I need you to listen to me," he felt as if Lecter was looming over him and couldn't tell if the man seemed monstrous to him or not. He felt as if he needed to run but couldn't control his thoughts long enough to understand why.

"Don't come near me!" he choked out, "I can't, I *won't*, I..."

"This is not a joke," Lecter said seriously, cutting Will off, making him feel small and childish as he panicked and struggled, "you could have seriously hurt yourself tonight, do you understand that? You could have burned yourself while cooking, or worse burned the whole cabin to the ground with you in it. Is that what you wish to happen? Do you need to hurt yourself or someone else before you will accept what you need to do?"

"Please," he knew he was practically sobbing, curling in on himself, "*please don't do this to me*."

"Let me help you Will," Lecter said in that same calm tone; his face seemed to fill up Will's vision, more and more, until all he could see were maroon eyes, "I hate to see you like this. Let me help you."

He wasn't entirely sure how it happened but he ended up with the pills in his mouth. He didn't remember swallowing them. There was a vague memory of smothering cloth. He thought the next morning that his shoulder felt sore but there were no bruises. It was a hazy blur until the sunlight was again out.

Will stared at the window, curtains drawn, and tried very, very hard to make his mind work. It felt foggy and sticky, as if his brain had been replaced with cotton candy stuck with saliva. He thought he could hear someone moving around in the next room. Calling out seemed like a bad idea as his throat, when he swallowed, felt raw and painful as if he had been screaming for hours. The thought made him feel nauseous.

It was difficult to get up. He felt stiff, sore and lightheaded. The duvet was heavy and warm, a contrast to the cold air as he struggled out from under it. He sat on the edge of the bed and let his head hang down, his feet cold against the wooden floorboards. As were his legs and arms. Someone had undressed him before putting him to bed. Unless I did it myself, Will thought but he had no memory of doing so. He was wearing only his boxer shorts and t-shirt.

He struggled up and managed to fumble over to his suitcase, pulling out a pair of jeans, a thick, brown lamb's wool jumper and a pair of socks. He found his glasses on the nightstand and put them on along with the rest of his clothes. Even though he didn't need them they made him feel a little more stable.

Now what? he thought. He looked to the bedroom door as if it would bite him. In the sunlight the room didn't seem as dangerous as it had the night before, or what little memory he had of it. The space had felt confining, claustrophobic. Now it seemed open and airy, the light wooden pine and the white curtains lifting the nightmarish dread. Still, inside the room he was safe. Outside, well...outside he would have to face everything. Suddenly nowhere seemed safe. You can't run from this, he repeated to himself. He lifted his right hand and rubbed it over his mouth before stepping forwards with purpose and opening the door.

"Oh, hey, Mr. Graham isn't it?" an unfamiliar face wearing a ranger's uniform stood in the middle of Will's living room, "the Doc asked if I would stay here while he went out to get some things. Said you were feeling rough and shouldn't be on your own. You feeling ok?"

Somehow facing a stranger was simultaneously better and worse than facing Lecter. One the one hand Nameless Ranger didn't have any idea what had happened the night before and, if Lecter's agreement of privacy was to be trusted, he wouldn't have told the man either. On the other hand Will was already jumpy and anxious and didn't deal well with people he didn't know. Especially ones trained to be helpful and amiable. He avoided the ranger's eyes and stuffed his hands into his pockets. Answer him, he told himself sternly when the silence became awkward.

"Yeah," he said, clearing his throat when he realised his voice was hoarse, "thank you. You don't need to stay."

"Well, I understand that you might feel better," the ranger said, his tone unintentionally condescending, a hand on his hip, "but I wouldn't feel right leaving you on your own in case something happened."

Finally Will managed to make eye contact, just for a few seconds. Enough to gauge the man's sincerity and find it to be trustworthy. He was taller than Will, maybe heads with Lecter. Short-ish black hair and handsome face; deep blue, kind eyes. Will could see him with a wife, a dog and two point five children in a two storey house somewhere.

"Thank you," Will said again, "I appreciate that," even though he wanted nothing more than for the man to leave.

He offered the ranger tea because he didn't have anything else. The man refused politely, saying he didn't touch the stuff. Looking at the clock Will was astonished to find it was twenty past twelve in the afternoon. Will realised he was starving. I didn't eat last night, he thought. To continue to distract himself Will further offered lunch. The ranger, who finally introduced himself as Rufus Jones, had agreed to that quickly when he realised Will was pulling out bacon and eggs from the fridge. While he was cooking he was more than aware that the frying pan and the mess from the night before had been cleaned up. He cooked in silence while Rufus the ranger asked if he could turn on the television. They ate while some

trashy daytime reality t.v. program played. Will was just glad it saved him from small talk. He didn't think he could have stood that.

What happened last night? He asked himself. As he tried to remember it was as if the sticky substance in his mind merely stuck faster. He drank his tea and the taste seemed dry on his tongue. Will blinked and looked down at the tea, dark in the white mug, and allowed the memory to come to him. The taste of bitter, dusty pills in his mouth. He was sure he had tasted it but wasn't sure if his memories of the Meclizine and last night were simply blurring together. Lecter had given him something, hadn't he? Will fished in his pockets but found nothing. When Rufus began looking at him oddly Will simply avoided his eyes and continued drinking his tea.

Lecter arrived twenty five minutes later, properly dressed suggesting he had been home. Will had stood up to wash the dishes in order to give himself something to do when the car pulled up. The ranger said his goodbyes, "*Nice to meet you Mr. Graham, I hope you feel better soon. Oh and thanks for the lunch*", and walked out to meet him. Will watched them talk through the window as the basin filled with hot water, puffing up the liquid soapsuds. He chewed at the inside of his cheek and tried to avoid the itch of needing to know what was being said. Turning from the window he sighed and turned off the tap, roughly pushing the sleeves of his jumper up his arms. It was with confusion that a sharp pain blossomed at the crook of his right elbow. Will frowned, pulling up the sleeve of his jumper to check the flesh there. What he found made him stare in disbelief.

"Good afternoon Will," Lecter said as he entered, the sound of the ranger's car leaving in the background; he closed the door behind him, "how are you feeling today?"

He would have taken the man's greeting as more mind play if Will was able to think of anything more than, "Did you *inject* me?" as he held his elbow, the small bruise and puncture mark visible there against the vein. He stared at Lecter as if he were expecting some sort of grand answer, or perhaps denial.

"Yes," was instead what Lecter gave him as an answer; plain, simple and only more confusing, "Will, I would like you to sit down. I feel it would be better than standing here throwing accusations."

"I'm not doing anything until you explain this," Will said in a low voice, unconsciously cradling his right arm.

"Alright," Lecter acquiesced, throwing Will once more with his compliance, "I gave you a sedative."

"You did *what*?"

"You were hysterical," Lecter explained as he put down a small bag he was carrying onto the armchair, unbuttoning his coat, "tried to hurt yourself after I gave you your medication."

"Medication," Will said absently, his voice retreating just as his mind was trying to do from Lecter's explanation.

"Do you remember Will?" Lecter asked with concern; Will shook his head, "I gave you clozapine, do you remember? No? I thought this might happen. When I tried to restrain you from hurting yourself you attacked me. That's when I deemed it prudent to use a mild sedative, something that wouldn't interfere with the clozapine."

It seemed grotesquely apt timing as Lecter removed his coat, revealing just the tips of three thick, red nail marks leading down the base of his neck and disappearing under the collar of his sweater. Will held his arm closer and found his foggy mind was unable to process everything at once. He slowly walked forwards and took a seat on the sofa, eyes staring at nothing. Lecter walked over to stand in front of him before kneeling down, bringing his eyes in line with Will's. Without a word he reached up and put the back of his hand to Will's forehead. Will did not flinch at the contact of cold skin against his heated flesh. Instead his eyes moved of their own volition as Lecter pulled his hand away. Reaching out to hook his fingertips around the neck of Lecter's sweater and pull down slightly he revealed the red runnels where nails had caught and torn flesh. With a sense of nauseating dread Will realised that there was a dark crust under the nails of his right hand. He pulled it back from Lecter and looked. Dried blood.

"It is alright," Lecter said as Will stared at his hand, "you were not yourself."

"What could I be other than myself?" Will asked quietly.

"Someone else," Lecter suggested as he took Will's hand in his own, covering his nails from view; Lecter's hand was strong, calluses where he wrote with his pencil and where Will assumed he had worked with his scalpel, "someone from the dark places in your mind. You have been forced to compartmentalise Will, as you work to understand the black hearts of those whom you chase. Yet you feel so keenly, don't you. Absorbing them."

"Sometimes I look too closely," Will tried to rationalise, the words falling out of his mouth even as he wished he could gather them back up and hide them, "see too much. But..."

"But what?" Lecter prompted when he did not go on.

"It blurs," he said, noting Lecter's thumb smoothing over the back of his hand softly, "everything melts together. Sometimes it's like a residue. Two pieces of clay pressed together that leave bits of themselves on the other when pulled apart. Yet sometimes..."

It wasn't difficult to speak anymore, just a concept he did not want to articulate.

"...sometimes," his voice dropped and he felt his tightly closed self open a fraction more to where the darkness lay, swishing its tail; he looked directly into Lecter's eyes and felt terrified of his own words, "sometimes when I look at the victims I'm supposed to honour I feel like *I* killed them. I can feel their blood on my hands and the thrill in my nerves."

"It excites you?" Hannibal asked curiously.

"Not sexually," Will shook his head; admitting it to another made it more real than when he had shied away from the idea himself, "it makes me feel whole."

"A sense of completion," Lecter nodded his head slightly.

"It's...euphoric," Will confessed his sin with difficulty, frowning deeply, "until I wake up again and look down at my hands. They're clean, only they're not and I'm the only one who can still see the blood there. Jack thinks...I'm some sort of miracle. Instead I'm like...god I don't *know*."

"Do you feel like the Copycat Killer, Will?" Lecter asked, the soothing motion of his thumb making Will feel slightly drowsy.

"No," Will hesitated, "not *like* him. I feel as if I...*am* him," he felt his voice shaking and his blood speeding through his veins, rushing in his ears; what am I saying, he thought, what am I *saying*? "I...I look at what he's done and..."

"Yes, Will?" Lecter asked, his eyes bright.

"I look at what he does and it's beautiful to me," he said it with distaste, horror and awe, melding together. Lecter seemed to stare at him hungrily and Will couldn't understand it. He wanted to look away but wasn't sure if what he was seeing was real or not. He opened his mouth but it took a few seconds for any words to emerge, "am I...am I going to do something terrible? I don't want to wake up one day to find the blood on my hands is real."

When Lecter let go of his hand and reached up with both hands towards him, Will had an irrational moment of worry that he would touch his face with those calloused but soft hands. The disappointment when Lecter simply removed his glasses was even more confusing. Will reached up too late to try and take them back. Lecter simply folded the legs and put them on the side table.

"You do not need to hide from yourself," Lecter said as he took Will's hand once more; Will looked down as something was pressed into his palm. A yellowy orange pill bottle with a white cap, a pharmacy prescription stuck at a slight angle around the plastic: *Graham, W - Clozapine 25mg*. *One tablet four times a day.* "I can help you find who you are."

"Maybe I don't want to know who I am," Will said, defeated.

"Then perhaps I do," Lecter was smiling softly when Will looked up at him once more.

"Why?" Will felt as if he had been asking that a lot lately.

"Because you are my friend and I care about you."

It didn't seem enough. That was what Will thought but couldn't comprehend. He closed his eyes and tightened his hand around the pill bottle, bringing his other hand to his face. He rubbed at the tired, sensitive skin. It seemed to tingle like fireflies, blinking on and off.

"And you don't know what that means to me," Will said genuinely, looking away to his left as he brought his hand down, "everything you've done. I don't think anyone has ever..."

...cared about me this way, was how he had wanted to finish it. He couldn't bring himself to. Everything was circling around and around in his head, a whirlpool which led to an unknown

place. He was still swimming, still struggling against the inevitable pull. He looked at Lecter as the man once more took his hand in his own, thumb rubbing over the back of his hand rhythmically.

It was difficult to jump into the abyss, Will thought as he nodded in acquiescence to Lecter's unasked question, but so much easier when there was someone else there to jump with you.

Les Parents Auraient Tort de Croire Que

Chapter Notes

> As the titles are getting a bit more complex I thought I should probably put in a translation so the pun comes across in this one. (I have also done the previous ones too. Sorry, should have done that before!)
>
> Title translation: Under False Belief (or lit. The Parents Would Be wrong to Think That)

It was just after lunch when Will arrived at the Port Haven Psychiatric Facility. The week had slowly thawed until the landscape was nothing but browns, greys and slush where the snow had been. The air was still chill but held the threat of spring. Life was coming back to Baltimore and the presence of that vibrancy skipped through all the streets, trees and people alike. Will wished he could feel it as keenly as he used to, or used to want to. Instead he felt like keeping himself separate from it, built up into his fort so he could instead survey. One day he would go down again. Just not today.

The building seemed lonely under the grey sky. The chimney did not smoke and the walled gardens were more for quiet therapy rather than quiet walks. Will thought it all merely added to a wasted aesthetic. The place was as much of a prison as Chilton's asylum. Two staff members, standing out against the grey stone in their white uniforms, loitered in the car park by a blue Buick and smoked. Will said nothing, glancing at them as he hurried through the maze of cars towards the entranceway.

A blast of hot, dry air and the sound of heels clicking on hard floors greeted him. By now the receptionist, Janice, new his face and waved him in with a smile. Will returned it but didn't appreciate it. He didn't think he'd ever want to feel welcome enough in a place like this that he was let in just at the sight of his face. Too close to home for comfort.

"She's in her room," Janice said in her nasal tone, red hair pulled into a tight bun, "just got back from group."

"Thanks," Will said. A bit of unfortunate timing; Abigail was always tetchy after group.

He wished he'd waited for Lecter. Standing outside Abigail's room he felt scruffy, physically and mentally. He pulled down his shirt and tucked it in tighter, taking off his puffy coat and putting on his glasses. He knew he shouldn't feel nervous but he did. Somehow, irrationally, he felt that Abigail would be able to sense the crazy on him. Hunter sounding out prey. The dream face he'd had of Abigail burst into his mind as he opened the door, fazing over her as she turned towards him. Will had to blink the image away. Her small smile was enough encouragement for him to walk inside.

“Thought you were both coming at three,” she said; she sat cross-legged on her bed with a book open before her, right hand playing with her neck scarf.

“I got out early,” Will kept vague, “thought I’d surprise you.”

“Oh,” she said, folding the page and closing her book, “did you see Tracy on the way up?”

“The ward nurse? No,” Will said as he pulled over a chair, “Why?”

“She said she’d bring me the next one,” Abigail lifted up her almost finished book and shrugged, “I like to keep busy.”

“What are you reading? I could buy you a pile if you want, so you don’t run out. Just give me the names.”

“No, that’s ok. There’s more than enough to do the rounds in here.”

She always refused his gifts. Will knew why but it still stung. There was a want there, to make sure she was safe, comfortable, happy. He treated her like he imagined he would his own child because he felt that she was his responsibility now. He had killed Garrett Hobbs and saved Abigail’s life; in doing so he had become responsible for her future. Only Abigail didn’t seem to see it that way. She was young enough to still need help and yet old enough to want her own independence. Old enough to understand exactly what had happened and yet young enough to not be fully able to cope. Will didn’t resent her for it, merely resented himself more for always wanting what he couldn’t have.

“Ok,” he said, nodding, “well, if you ever need anything, you know you just have to ask.”

“Yeah, I know.”

A short pause during which Will wondered what to say. He looked around the room surreptitiously, hoping for something to strike up a conversation about. It was as he searched that he saw it. A letter on the bedside table, partly folded up, from a realtor. Will frowned.

“Did you..?” he hesitated, unsure if bringing it up would be a sore issue, “sell the house?”

“Yeah,” Abigail nodded, looking defiantly upset, “got something for it. Only apparently I won’t see any of it.”

“It’ll be used as compensation for the bereaved families of the victims,” Will said softly.

“I know,” Abigail said, looking down at her hands, “Freddie told me.”

“Freddie?” Will’s head snapped to attention, “Freddie Lounds? What was she doing here? Have you been talking to her?”

He knew he must have sounded aggressive because Abigail was looking at him with a slight frown but her eyes were wary. Will sat back in his chair and bit down on his anger. She doesn’t need your spite right now, he thought, she needs your support. Yet the mention of Lounds’ name put a bad feeling in Will’s stomach.

“She came to visit, I asked her to,” Abigail clarified as Will opened his mouth again, “she’s going to help me write.”

“Write?” Will asked, “Don’t tell me you’re doing an article for that rag.”

“No, no,” she said, crossing her arms defensively, “I’m going to write a book. A book about the truth.”

Will took a deep breath. Oh Freddie, you fucking *vulture*, Will thought with venom. Is it not enough to have the kid dependant on you for information but now you want to sell her out for a quick buck? But then he already knew Freddie’s problem, that she had the same cold heart shared by ad execs and lawyers that allowed a lack of conscience; he hadn’t yet thought about Abigail’s until now. He tried to pick the problem out. When it came to him he wasn’t happy he’d tried in the first place. She trusted all the wrong people because they were confident and manipulative like her father and was still too vulnerable to trust the right ones. Will knew that she didn’t fully trust him and it hurt, he wouldn’t lie, but those were his own insecurities to deal with. He sighed and rubbed his cheek, the skin there itching. The thought made his mind feel loose.

“A book,” he said, the words sounding dirty in his mouth, “Abigail, I don’t think that’s such a great idea.”

“But it’ll be the *truth*,” she said, emphasising the word, “I have a right to say what happened, especially because...”

“What?” Will asked after she hesitated for too long.

“Because everyone thinks I did it,” she said defiantly, “and I *didn’t*.”

“I don’t think this is going to...” Will knew it was futile but couldn’t help himself.

“No one’s going to believe me unless I tell them everything!” Abigail cut in, her eyes watering.

“Sweetheart, people might not believe you either way...”

“Don’t call me that,” her voice was hard and, for a split second, Will thought she looked like she hated him.

He stopped talking, hoping that the pain didn’t show on his face. I should have waited, he thought, I should have waited until he got here. Swallowing tasted sour, leaving a bitter tang in his mouth. Even Abigail seemed a little taken aback by her own words. They shuffled about in silence for a moment. Will wanted to break it but, in his heart, hoped that Abigail would. When the silence became unbearable he spoke up.

“I’m sorry,” he tried not to sound defeated, “I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, it’s just...” Abigail bit her lip before continuing, “sorry. Didn’t mean to snap, it's just group, y’know? Makes me a bit, I don’t know...irksome.”

The word sounded odd in Abigail's young mouth, almost anachronistic. Will wondered if it was something her dad used to say.

"It's ok," Will reassured, "I was..."

The door opened with a very quiet click but Will had been waiting for the sound; was glad for it, in fact. He stopped talking and looked over his shoulder as Lecter entered, seeming overly tall from his seated position. It was also slightly jarring to see him back in his 'normal' attire after his week of monochrome; his suit was a warm grey with a Glen check, a pale blue shirt and smooth chocolate coloured tie beneath. Maroon eyes surveyed the situation and Lecter closed the door. Will rubbed at his face again and knew that the man had picked up on the tension in the air. He was like a bloodhound, sniffing out problems floating in the atmosphere of a room. Probably what makes him such a good psychiatrist, Will thought as Lecter placed his jacket onto the other chair and, instead of sitting, took his spot standing at the bottom of the bed, watching them both.

"Hello Abigail," he said with his usual smile, "Will."

"Hi," Abigail said, clearing her throat.

"You're early too," Will said, checking his watch.

"My last patient did not show," Lecter said, the subtle change in his tone showing the irritation and displeasure; that disappeared as he continued, "but I feel I have missed something."

Once more Will stayed silent and gave Abigail the opportunity to speak up. She did not take it. Will took another deep breath and let it out as a long sigh.

"You only missed the appetisers," Will said wryly, not hiding his disapproval as he continued, "Abigail wants to write a book. With Freddie Lounds' help."

"I see," Lecter said, raising his brows slightly, "a book about..?"

"About everything," Abigail said; there was a hopeful look in her eyes, as if she thought Lecter might understand better than Will did, "about the...murders and dad, to tell everyone that I was a victim too."

"And you think this will make the stigma of your father's murders leave you?" Lecter asked, his eyes narrowed slightly. Abigail did not reply, just licked her lips, "I can guess with certainty that you have already said this is a foolish plan?" Lecter asked, looking to Will.

"I have," Will said, "but I don't think I'm exactly an authority figure right now."

"Abigail," Lecter said, perhaps feeling that authority could rest in him, "this need for a public apology says a lot about how you are feeling. You must understand that you have to accept your own innocence before you can prove it to others."

"I know I'm innocent," she said, frowning, "I didn't know anything, I didn't *do* anything. But they won't know that, no one will. They'll hate me for what dad did, think I did it too."

“Like Nicholas Boyle you mean?” Will asked gently.

Pain, fear and anger were emotions he expected to flit across Abigail’s face; the guilt he did not expect. Will frowned and tried not to think too much about it. His head was starting to nip, pain building in his temples. He automatically reached for his Advil but remembered he had agreed to stop taking so many pills or, as Lecter called it, curb his excessive pain relief.

“As the treatment progresses,” Lecter said, “your headaches will diminish, the mood swings and insomnia will be the next to succumb as will the hallucinations.”

“I can’t work if I have a migraine,” Will had said bluntly as he lay on his bed, curtains drawn, and stared at the far wall. The empty feeling inside him was trying to grow but Lecter kept talking, stunting it.

“And if you continue to take your medication and work through things with me then you won’t have to,” Lecter said reasonably, “I will take blood samples every day for the first few weeks you are on the clozapine, then every week thereafter. It can have some side effects that can cause problems.”

“Such as?” Will asked. His fear of needles made him want to fight Lecter on his decision but he knew deep down that Lecter wouldn’t be doing it without a reason.

“Low white blood cell count,” Lecter said as he scribbled something down, “seizures if too much is taken, myocarditis. Simple to test for, I can do it myself. These are all rare side effects, you understand, but it is better to be safe than to be sorry. However, I feel that your dependency on pills should not extend to your pain relief. The headaches may become phantom pain, something imagined more than felt.”

“Says a man who’s clearly never had a migraine,” Will said acrimoniously.

Still, he had agreed. He did to most things Lecter said it seemed. Will looked to the man as Abigail fidgeted on the bed; he gave Will a concerned glance.

“He thought I killed them,” Abigail said eventually, “shouldn’t I be allowed to prove him wrong? Why can’t I have my say? Freddie...”

“I do not think it prudent to take advice from Ms. Lounds,” Lecter interjected, “you must understand she does not have your best interests at heart, as we do.”

“She wants to use you,” Will said, wishing to make it plain and clear, “you’re a paycheck, not a noble cause for her to play the white knight.”

“And you would have to take responsibility for your words,” Lecter continued, “it would not be only yourself and your father you would be representing, it would be Will and myself as well. We are a part of your story now.”

“We don’t want to hurt you Abigail,” Will said, having to consciously force himself not to shorten her to Abby, keeping away from pet names that always came easily to him as he became familiar, “you have to understand that things are more complex than simply stating

facts and expecting a single outcome. People are always more open to believing the worst rather than the best."

"Are you trying to say I'll be labelled for the rest of my life and I just have to accept that?" Abigail said, her eyes afire with angry desperation.

"I'm saying that you shouldn't put all your hopes in one bestseller," he said, trying for Lecter's reasonable tone, "right now you need to focus on getting better, making sure you're happy with yourself before you go about making the world see what you do," he hesitated on saying more but, after a few seconds' internal debate, decided it was safe enough, "I've been going through a bit of...soul-searching myself recently, putting things in perspective. It's cathartic, really. Was enough to make me realise what's important to me. You are one of those things Abigail."

"Just because you killed my father doesn't mean you get to replace him."

Somehow Abigail's calm, concise tone was far more cutting than her bitter, wounded one. Will felt his mouth clamp shut and his posture curl inwards slightly on instinct.

"And you must understand that we are responsible for you now," Lecter said, his disapproval of Abigail's words evident, "you cannot blame Will and myself for your situation. Looking for others to censure for your own pain will get you nowhere," a pause where Lecter cocked his head and regarded Abigail as a disappointed parent surveys a self-indulgent child, "I am surmising that group did not go well today."

Abigail looked suitably chastised as she closed her lips tightly and looked down at the bed sheets without lowering her head. Will tried not to give in to the urge to simply stand up and leave. Lecter watched them both as if waiting for someone to acknowledge their reality.

They left not long after, once Lecter had told Abigail about the meteor shower he and Will had watched the week before. Will stayed quiet, unless it was to agree with something. He felt a little cold. The alarm on his watch went off. He needed to take his meds but didn't want to leave just yet, and he wouldn't dream of taking them in front of Abigail. He decided to wait until Lecter was finished. It was nice to see Abigail enthusiastic about something, so he sat and watched as Lecter told her about the Geminids, much as he had for Will on the cold cabin roof eight days before.

It was twenty past eleven at night in the bitter cold when Will's watch alarm went off. He fumbled to stop it through thick gloves. Eventually the incessant beeping was clicked into silence. He fished his pill bottle out of his jacket and, pulling off one glove with the help of his teeth, popped the top and took one of the small pills without water. Bitter dust. He ran his teeth over his tongue and grimaced. Will looked up at the heavens and waited.

The skies had cleared as if on cue for the event that had the beaches far more crowded than they should have been at this time of year. Will hadn't wanted to join the crowds, all shuffling in the cold sand with mugs of hot coffee from plastic flasks, eyes bright and mouths chatting.

He preferred to sit up on the cabin roof, precariously reached with the help of a ladder and strong arms. He was sure that the meteor shower would look spectacular on the lake, the shooting stars reflected in the mirror-like water, but the hard tiles beneath his legs reminded him of home. It was a calm difference to lying in bed and looking up at the ceiling, waiting for the seconds to tick by on the wall clock. Three days of allowing his sinking depression to fight Lecter's attempts to dredge him up from under the water he had descended into.

Everything had been flat and grey. The only thoughts that circled his head were sad ones or harsh ones or horrific ones. He knew the feeling, it was sickeningly familiar. Hopeless. Hopelessness. Lecter hadn't allowed him to stay there for long. Something Will would always thank him for: making him see the vibrancy in the world before the grey swallowed him whole for the second time in his life.

Will ended up so preoccupied, staring at the star sprayed darkness above him while he remembered the darkness in his own head, that he almost missed the sounds of a car. Will looked down in surprise as his guest stepped from the car and almost automatically brushed down his black coat. Lecter looked up at him as if fully expecting to find him there. Will didn't say anything, even as Lecter, without hesitation, used the same ladder as Will had and found his way up. He sat down beside Will and let out a long breath, rubbing his gloved hands together. Will adjusted his fleece hat and looked at him.

"You should have said you were coming," Will said, "I would have brought something warm to drink."

"I deal well with the cold," Hannibal said, his eyes bright as they looked skyward.

"Yeah, I can see that. So you were *listening to me yesterday."*

"My apologies if I appeared distracted," Lecter said, his eyes flitting back and forth, "I have had trouble with some of my caseload this week. I do remember what you said. It sounded as if you would enjoy the company."

"I didn't know you would be interested in something like this," Will said, feeling a guilty stab at the thought of adding so much extra work to Lecter's schedule just to take care of him.

"I have a weakness for beautiful things," Hannibal's mouth quirked in a smile that spoke of a personal joke.

"Well, the first hour is supposed to be the most spectacular," Will said, mainly because he didn't know how to reply.

They sat in silence for another few minutes while a cuckoo in the trees behind them called out in a slow drone. A fox, which Will had found mooching around the outside bin a few days before, trotted past the house soundlessly. Will began to feel the familiar itch of an awkward silence but Hannibal did not seem perturbed. Strangely, despite his inner anxieties, Will didn't feel self-conscious in watching his guest while he, in turn, watched the stars.

"Something on your mind?" Hannibal asked after another minute or so; he brought his gaze back to earth and looked at Will, "You seem as if you would like to ask me something."

“Just wondering if this is going to be an everyday occurrence.”

“I believe the Geminid meteor shower happens only once a year.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Will shook his head and wished he’d never brought it up.

“I know,” Hannibal replied, his smile becoming egregious as Will’s apprehension rose, “you do not have to worry that I will show up at your door unannounced after tomorrow.”

“Then you were *doing it on purpose,” Will said wryly.*

“I did not want you to prepare for my visits,” Hannibal said, “you would not have been yourself otherwise. You have an extraordinary ability to mimic, Will, I have not seen anything quite like it in a long time. A useful survival mechanism...”

He allowed Hannibal his small diversion but didn’t feel like joining in on the self-analysis. He wished he hadn’t brought it up more because he wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about most things. This week had been a bizarre morphing process. From one unknown to another; or from the monster in the closet to the monster under the bed as Will liked to put it. He wasn’t well, he knew that, he admitted that, but he knew he was getting better. He could already feel it slightly in the diminishing itch in his skin and the absence of the feverish sweat when he woke. Symptoms he had become used to as everyday occurrences, now more noticeable in their severity through their absence.

Will wondered when he had first noticed it, the familiar itch. Since the beginning of his realisation his life had become a neatly packaged, full set of Kübler-Ross: denial, isolation, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance. A short list to précis a long journey that began with Jack Crawford in his auditorium, hauling him back into the world he had successfully escaped.

Yet it hadn’t truly started until he met Doctor Lecter, sitting cross-legged in Jack’s office. Will had thought him cold, affected and obsequious. To make it worse Lecter had subtly slipped into his head and pulled out everything that Will tried to clam up and keep safe: ‘ I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love.*’ A concise summation of Will Graham in fifty words or less. Will knew he would dislike Doctor Lecter with his small, smug smile and his hard eyes.*

Then they had sat down to breakfast the day everything fell apart. The day Will had shot Hobbs. Will hadn’t wanted him there. Lecter refused to acknowledge the atmosphere Will unconsciously created. Then they had spoken;

“I would apologize for my analytical ambush,” *Lecter had said,* “but I know I will soon be apologizing again and you’ll tire of that eventually, so I have to consider using apologies sparingly.”

“Just keep it professional,” *Will had rebutted bluntly*.

“Or we could socialize like adults,” *Lecter had not smiled but his face had lightened, as if amused,* “god forbid we become friendly.”

“I don’t find you that interesting.”

“You will.”

He had scoffed at the idea at the time. Yet the sausage and egg had been something he wasn’t used to; an automatic courtesy. Lecter had driven him that day. Lecter had spoken to him openly but in riddles. Lecter had scurried under his skin and nestled there. Lecter had held Abigail’s throat closed as Will shook and blurted words and tried to wipe the blood from his hands and keep Hobbs out of his head. Lecter had pushed himself into his life. Lecter had pulled Will’s thoughts out of his mind like a streaming ribbon, attracting Will’s wandering gaze. Will found that he had no problem looking into Hannibal’s oddly coloured eyes as they spoke. In the end Lecter had been right. He always seemed to be.

Will looked at him and watched the man’s eyes light up as the meteor shower arrived, streaking laser lines across the pitch sky. Will decided he was glad he had a friend precocious enough to force him to face himself, and care enough to do so.

The wine cork slid out with a small sucking sound as Lecter depressed the legs of the corkscrew. It was blackcurrant red in the glass and smelled wonderful; dry and sweet. Will declined, taking a sip of the ginger ale Lecter had offered him on his arrival. He wanted to be compos mentis enough for the drive home. He sliced an onion in half as Lecter took his own sip, watching the glass of wine as he set it down as if to compliment it on its good taste.

Inevitably they had fallen to talking about Abigail. Will knew they would because he kept bringing her up, subtly at first and then more prominently as the night went on. After their visit to Port Haven they had stood in the car park talking for twenty minutes in the not-so-freezing air. When it had become obvious they had a lot to talk about Lecter had offered his house as a better setting. Will had realised that his psychiatrist had a penchant for keeping him to dinner. An odd trend in someone who had essentially adopted him as a patient. Will had expected Lecter to back off considering their now professional relationship yet, if anything, he only pulled them closer together, like a sewer tightening the thread between two bolts of cloth.

However, Will was appreciative of the bubble Lecter had created for them. When inside of it he did not have to deal with anything unless he wanted to, whether it be Jack, Alana, Abigail, casework or even just the inside of his own head. After two weeks he was beginning to realise the benefits of his treatment and just how disruptive the symptoms he’d been having were. Two nights ago, for the first time in a long time, he had slept the whole night through. It was almost enough to have him forgive Lecter his cruel to be kind treatment of him during his week at the cabin. He knew it was a skewed view of the doctor patient relationship, as well as a friendship. Truthfully Will wasn’t quite sure what sang on the string between them as it tightened.

“I’ll get used to her bluntness eventually,” Will shrugged his shoulders as he thought of Abigail, “like a boxer taking blows to toughen the body. It’s bracing if nothing else.”

“It seems unfair to compare yourself to tenderised meat,” Lecter said, turning on the large gas ring underneath a copper braisière, “Abigail does not scratch to draw blood. It is the self defence of a wounded animal pressed back against the cliff.”

“I don’t mean to make her feel like she has no way out but to claw through me.”

“Perhaps she does not want to feel trapped by another who would hold sway over her future,” Lecter suggested, adding oil to the pan and adjusting the flame.

“You make me sound like a predator with a scent,” Will murmured. The words brought back a memory of four days prior.

The light in the consulting room was dimmed but Will’s headache still persisted. He rubbed at his temples with his knuckles and bit at the inside of his mouth. The pain was momentarily diverted.

“If you would like, I have aspirin,” Lecter paused his session to offer.

“No,” Will said, “thanks but I’d rather stick with it.”

“I’m glad you’re taking my advice seriously,” Lecter said.

“Don’t worry,” Will had tried to joke darkly, “I’ll find some way to pay you back.”

It may have been his eyes that changed, or maybe a quirk of the mouth; Will wasn’t sure but Lecter suddenly looked interested.

“A heartfelt sentiment,” Lecter said, “Is that perhaps how you felt about Hobbs? Perhaps even Budge? A sense of payback?”

“What? I...no,” Will hated that his pounding head made it difficult to keep up with Lecter’s lateral thought process, “I didn’t have a grudge against them. It was my job.”

“I would believe that if I did not know how deeply you entangled yourself in their minds in order to do your job*,” Lecter said, cocking his head marginally to the left, “to be in the mind of the man you have killed while you pull the trigger. It must cultivate very intense feelings.”*

He didn’t want to answer to that statement. It was enough that he allowed Lecter to treat him, medicate him and essentially care for him, but this wasn’t a place he wanted to go. He kept those thoughts locked away for a reason; self-preservation more than self-deprecation. Will tried to think of something to say that would placate Lecter’s curiosity.

“It’s an ugly thing, killing,” he said slowly, taking his fists away from his head as he breathed in deeply, “maybe the ugliest thing I’ve ever done. I feel like it...sticks to me. A residue. It’s difficult to wash off.”

“You feel what you have done is ugly,” Lecter said, looking down to flip back through his notes; he stopped on a page and ran his finger down the paper, “and yet you told me at the cabin that you find the work of the Copycat killer to be beautiful.”

“That’s not the same thing,” Will rebutted.

“You said, and I quote, ‘I look at what he does and it is beautiful to me’,” Lecter closed the notes with a snap and looked up at Will as if daring him to deny it, “I beg to differ that these two feelings are as diverse as you believe them to be. On the one hand you think of your murders as grotesque and yet another’s as divine.”

“I’m not a murderer,” Will said strongly, unwilling to answer the other half of Lecter’s accusation, “I was protecting Abigail, I was protecting you*.”*

A moment where Lecter observed him curiously while Will blinked and tried to straighten out his neck. It didn’t hurt as he expected it to. It was obvious to him that his symptoms were lessening as the days went by. Yet as his mind became clearer he had expected other things to come into focus with it. It horrified him that the dark parts of his mind did not melt away with his itching skin and his night fevers. Instead they lay there still, twitching their tails, walking back and forth in their cage. Clip, clip, clip, clip.

“Could this perhaps be,” Lecter spoke up cautiously, “a skewed sense of view?”

“Meaning what?” Will bit out, feeling antsy, “That I can’t see the wood for the trees?”

“Perhaps,” Lecter accepted the idiom, “you are so close to the distasteful meat of your own acts that you refuse to see the other feelings contained within them. In the killers you seek you can live vicariously through their violence, become them without doing harm.”

“I think ‘vicariously’ is a bit of a stretch,” Will said tightly, “I don’t do this for pleasure.”

“Yet you must expect to emulate emotion as well as thought,” Lecter said.

“Only while I look,” Will lied, knowing Lecter would smell the lie, “I don’t feel the violence the way they do.”

“Then what do you feel, Will?”

Like a dog with a bone. Will knew Lecter wouldn’t let him skirt the issue. He ground his teeth and tried to think about it without truly thinking about it. It didn’t work. Instead, Will managed to peer into the cage where the dark things lay and see the truth of it. He swallowed down his worry and cleared his throat.

“I...it’s complicated.”

“I’m sure I will understand,” Lecter said.

That’s what I’m afraid of, Will thought. He dragged his bottom lip through his teeth and sighed.

“With Hobbs I was saving Abigail,” Will reiterated, “with Budge I was saving you. It...I guess if you were to give it a name it felt ‘just’.”

“You felt it was a sort of justice, killing them?” Lecter asked.

“Yes, it was just,” Will said, “they’d taken the lives of so many for no purpose except their own desire. They did not deserve to take another.”

“Did not deserve to live?” Lecter conjectured.

“Yes,” Will said without thinking; he hated that the words had come from his lips, frowning as he tried to process the feeling. Anger, frustration and something that made his anxiety justified, “but that isn’t all.”

Lecter watched him patiently. Will wondered whether it was wise to mention it but realised he’d already opened that can of worms. He met Lecter’s gaze and pushed his fingertips into the material of the chair.

“It wasn’t just righteousness, that’s part of a motive,” Will said; he had to break eye contact to continue, screwing up his eyes as the pain persisted, “it made me feel powerful. That I was the one to stop them. I felt powerful.”

“I am sure even God feels powerful when he kills his creations, Will,” Lecter said offhandedly, looking back at Will as he placed his notebook on the desk, “a divine sensation, to know that the mortal can be as God himself. You felt it as one who stops evil; an archangel in human form, perhaps.”

“And how does this angel become human?” hating the metaphor, he asked regardless.

Lecter watched him sagely, until he simply said, “It does not.”

Back in the kitchen Will bit at the inside of his lip and thought about the implications. Even though Lecter’s analogy had been overblown Will saw the truth in it. Something he had always feared; that he could not exist in society the way he was now. As he worked to project himself into the dark, into the minds of madmen, he could not have a normal life. Abigail was proof enough of that; he wasn’t stable enough to be a father, never mind to the girl he had essentially orphaned. Alana was *further* proof enough of that. Will knew she cared for him, thought that one day she could even love him. Only not in this lifetime, not if he continued to work for Crawford and certainly not if she ever found out about his psychosis. Even then, Will thought, she would always, in some way, consider him a project. Will knew he needed someone who could accept him as he was, flaws and all, someone who would understand.

The onions began to sting his eyes and Will stopped cutting to lean back for a moment, breathing through his mouth and out through his nose. Blinking his eyes pushed the waiting tears down the side of his cheeks. He wiped them away on the rolled up sleeve of his shirt and sniffed. *Just because you killed my dad doesn’t mean you get to replace him*. The words were sleek, concise and Will couldn’t escape them. He hoped, with time, he and Abigail could work around them instead.

“Abigail is right,” Lecter said after their silence, dicing carrots into tiny cubes; Will took another drink of ginger ale and then went back to chopping the onions. Lecter’s words had been eerily attuned to Will’s own thoughts, “you cannot fit the hole in her life, not yet.”

“I know,” Will said, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about her anymore.”

“Of course not,” Lecter said, his hands moving artfully across the board to snag a stick of celery for the chop, “but I suggest you give her time to settle before you begin spoiling her.”

“I wouldn’t spoil her,” Will disputed, but he was unable to keep the small smile from creeping onto his face and looked back down at his haphazard onion pile, “well, not too much anyway.”

When he was done he looked up to catch Lecter watching him through long eyelashes, his enigmatic smile firmly in place. Will pushed his chopping board towards the man and walked around to the sink to rinse his hands.

“Sorry if it’s a bit chaotic,” Will said as Lecter lifted the board and firmly scraped the entire two onions worth into the pan, “I’m not exactly known for my cooking skills.”

“I’m sure, with some training,” Lecter said as the onions began to sizzle, perfuming the air, “that I could mould you into a wonderful sous chef.”

“Ha, well,” Will laughed both at Lecter’s enthusiasm and at the mere thought of himself as any form of ‘chef’, “I’ll have to wish you good luck. You’re going to need it.”

“Oh, I have every faith in myself,” Lecter said, “now, if you would crush some garlic for me I would be most obliged.”

Dinner built itself in slow stages. The meat was braised, a stubby, fat round of beef, dark red and fresh. Will commented on the lack of fat on the piece as Lecter unwrapped it from its greaseproof paper shell. Lecter had merely smiled and commented, *I have a good butcher*. It was chunked and dried with muslin cloth while Will was relegated to stock duties, sautéing the onions, carrots, celery and other aromatics until brown.

Lecter turned on some music from a small device beside the food processor. An unknown melody spoke up quietly. *Čiurlionis*, he was told. Will hadn’t heard of him and Lecter didn’t look surprised. A mix of the beautiful and the ostentatious, Lecter described him as. Will could agree to that. As he listened he thought he would have to find an opportunity to introduce Lecter to Keith Jarrett. Something told him the man would appreciate it if he got a taste.

With the meat sealed and dried it was reintroduced to the veal stock Will had nurtured. A saucepan was prepared. The music changed; Will chose Tchaikovsky’s piano concerto number one from Lecter’s extensive library because he enjoyed it. Lecter good-humouredly called him predictable. Will smiled to himself and began reducing the wine in a small saucepan under Lecter’s instruction.

They talked about work because Will brought it up. It was pleasant to be able to bounce ideas off of someone who could give a stimulating response. Jack was too condescending in his placation of Will's continued belief in a second killer.

"I can't think of any other way it could have been done," Will said, frowning into the now thickening sauce, "a car would be the most reliable way to hoist something. It's a big car, something heavy but not too obvious that it would stand out. Land Rover, Jeep, Ford F250, something like that. It could have a portable motor. Even a winch, in fact that would make more sense."

"Then they may own a boat," Lecter said, walking up to stand beside Will and observe his handiwork, "or even have a job that requires towing."

"A rescue vehicle," Will thought, his hand stalling as he began to think more deeply, "or a tow truck. I'll have to look at the files again and see if Wells had any associations with someone who works in..."

"Don't stop stirring," Lecter interrupted Will's train of thought.

"Sorry."

"Have the tyre tracks come back with anything conclusive?" Lecter asked as he dried his hands on a tea towel tied to his apron.

"Not a thing," Will sighed as he spoke the words, still refusing to say 'nothing', "other than they're heavy duty Pirellis, snow treads. Could fit a range of big four by fours though, doesn't narrow it down."

"Have you considered that there is no accomplice?" Lecter suggested casually, as he always did when introducing something Will would not like.

"Yes, I had that thought," Will said wryly, "and then I got rid of it quick. You didn't see Wells. There's not a hope in hell that he did this on his own. Not only is he physically incapable, he has the beginnings of early onset dementia."

"That was not in the report," Lecter said, his eyes narrowed in curiosity.

"He had sticky notes in strange places in his house," Will explained, "one by his bed to remind him to lock the door, a full row over his computer with passwords, even one in a kitchen cupboard to remind him to buy chopped pork. He had a *lot* of chopped pork. Two cupboards full. Must have bought it every time he went out. Considering how perfect his totem was, the timing, the location, the date order of the bodies, I would be surprised if Wells wouldn't have messed up somewhere," Will's mind sparked, distracted by the connecting series in his mind and he paused, looking down at the now full cooker and the dishes being kept hot in the oven, "you know, this is a lot of food for two people. Expecting guests?"

"Now I remember why I don't keep company with analysts," Lecter said.

"No you don't," Will said, "considering you're surrounded."

“Alana will be joining us tonight,” Lecter said; Will couldn’t help but seize up marginally at the thought, “I hope that will not ruin your appetite.”

“No, it’s fine,” Will lied; not having spoken to Alana since he had called to thank her for looking after the dogs he knew she would pick up on something. Unfortunately Lecter wasn’t the only sharp psychologist he knew. He quickly rolled his shirt sleeves down and buttoned the cuffs. No need to help Alana on her way to sniffing him out by showing the needle marks.

“I already told you, I don’t like needles,” Will said as he sat on the old armchair in the cabin; and that was an understatement. Will didn’t hate needles, he didn’t detest them, he didn’t loathe them. It was something much worse, as far as he was concerned. He was scared of them.

“And I told you that would have to be either resolved,” Lecter said as he pulled out the small plastic vial and corresponding needle pointed sheath, “or worked around.”

“I know you’re a good psychiatrist,” Will said, hating the tension in his body at the sight of the needle, “but curing someone’s phobia in five minutes would be a miracle.”

“Then I suggest some other form of therapy,” Lecter said, placing the needle out of Will’s sight on the table behind a book, “you are too old for simple ‘distraction’, but I have seen this dealt with before. With your consent we could try a form of sleep therapy.”

“You want to knock me unconscious,” Will did not sound impressed.

“For you to be conscious while I draw your blood defeats the purpose of working around your phobia, Will,” Lecter said reasonably.

It was both true and obvious enough to make Will feel foolish for bringing it up. He shuffled in his chair and tried to make himself feel marginally comfortable. It needs to be done, he kept telling himself. So if it needs to be done, then take any way you can to do it. The go-getter attitude clashed with his irrational fear and they fought an ephemeral battle. In the end, as Lecter waited patiently, one won out.

“Alright,” Will said tightly, “what is it, this therapy?”

“Essentially it is a mild hypnosis,” Lecter said, making Will hate his need for compliance, “it will send you into a sleep-like state during which I can take a sample without distressing you. It is that simple.”

“I don’t like things that sound *simple,” Will said facetiously; he looked up to Lecter’s disapproval. Will sighed shortly through his nose and looked away, “alright, yes. Can we please just get this over with?”*

Lecter sat opposite him and Will felt like a child looking under the bed to check the monster wasn’t truly there. His stomach felt knotted. His memories surfaced. He stared into the

flickering light Lecter held and listened to the man's soothing voice. Even as the light irritated his eyes Will felt his world turning grey and fuzzy. The next thing he knew he was blinking his eyes open to see the ceiling above him. Lecter had laid him on the couch and was sat in the armchair Will had been in previously, reading a book. He had given Will a look that was both reassuring and confident, closing the book and putting it on his knee.

"You've been out for forty minutes," Lecter said before Will could ask, "how do you feel?"

"Like you knocked me out," Will said; his mood had been particularly antagonistic.

"Well then," Lecter sounded pleased with himself, "as long as you don't feel like I drew your blood I can call this a success."

Dinner was exquisite but Will was becoming used to that. Not that he would ever snub a meal cooked by Lecter's skilled hands. Somehow it tasted slightly better with his own hands in the mix. Tonight, beef bourguignon with parsley potatoes and runner beans, followed by crème caramel so smooth Will could have eaten two.

Alana had brought non-alcoholic wine which she talked Will into trying. It tasted awful and he told her so. He was glad when she laughed. Being worried that she would judge him without even knowing about his mental state was something he'd had to put up with for a long time.

She looked stunning; a midnight blue blouse, low cut but not too much, over a maroon skirt and her hair loose over her shoulders, but Will didn't want to push it by telling her. Instead he complimented her perfume. She had told him the name but Will didn't recognise it. They had retired to the living room, Lecter taking one of the armchairs and effectively steering Will and Alana onto the couch together. Will had felt like glaring at the man but knew Alana would notice. Thankfully talk had been artfully steered away from talking about Will's 'vacation'. He had Lecter to thank for that and begrudgingly forgave the man in his mind for the seating arrangements. However, when the phone rang Will had felt a little trapped.

"I'm sorry, excuse me," Lecter bowed his head slightly in apology and stood up to answer the phone.

"Honestly, does anyone around here take a break?" Alana asked, shaking her head, "He should be taking a leaf out of your tree and booking a holiday somewhere."

"Tree?" Will frowned amusedly with a smile, "Don't you mean leaf out of my book?"

"What did I say?" Alana asked.

"You said tree," Will smirked and finished his glass of foul wine.

"Did I?" Alana laughed and shook her head, "Yikes. Looks like I might have to take my own advice soon. I guess I have been pretty busy lately. Adding Abigail to the workload has

maybe tipped me over the edge."

Will licked his lips to rid them of the sour taste. He both wanted to ask her opinion of Abigail and did not, in case something came out that he didn't want to hear. Alana leaned back against the couch and watched him with curiosity in her eyes.

"You know, you look good Will," she said, "that week must have really done something for you."

"Yeah?" he said, trying to sound surprised, "well, I suppose I was pretty exhausted after Wells' case. Lots of long nights and early mornings."

"Mmm," she agreed vaguely, "but it's more than that. I mean, you just don't seem as jumpy, distracted. A month ago, well, I was worried about you, I was," she continued quickly when Will opened his mouth, a frown in place, "I mean nothing insanely drastic! Just...I was worried you were letting everything get to you. Jack and the work and everything. But now, yeah, you look good. Really."

"Thanks," Will smoothed away his frown, "that means a lot. Thanks for...well, just thanks."

"You're welcome," Alana smiled into her wine as she sipped it; she pulled a face and shook her head, coughing out a laugh, "you know what, you're right, this stuff tastes like crap."

They were laughing when Lecter returned. Will looked at the man and knew something was wrong. He gave him a questioning look.

"I am sorry for the lack of warning," Lecter said, "but I have a distraught patient on the phone who I must attend to."

"This late?" Will asked, looking at his watch; it had just ticked over into eleven forty five.

"Don't worry, I've been there," Alana said with a sigh, standing up and taking Will's empty glass, "anything I can do to help?"

"I'm afraid it's simply solved by a personal visit," Lecter said.

They were shown to the door after Lecter politely declined their offer to help clean up the dishes. It was cold outside, the night sky having cleared of clouds leaving it crisp and fresh. Will pulled his zip up tightly and put on his gloves. Alana went back to the living room to fetch her purse which she had left under the coffee table.

"Well, thank you for dinner," Will said genuinely.

"You are always welcome at my table," Lecter said, "and I do hope your dogs will not begin to resent me for keeping you away so often."

"Ah, Buster and the others couldn't resent you after those damn sausages," Will shook his head, "Winston on the other hand. You might have to bring him something next time you visit."

“I will bear that in mind,” Lecter said with humour, “oh, and do not forget Will,” he leaned to the left and looked around the corner to make sure Alana was not within earshot, “to reduce your dose from tomorrow.”

“I remember,” Will nodded; it was then that it struck him just how ungrateful he might seem, “you know, you should let me treat you next time. Or us, you should let us do something for you,” nice save there, Will thought sarcastically as Lecter watched him with a small smile, “the BCO are putting on Faccio in a couple of weeks.”

“The lost Amleto, I had heard,” Lecter nodded as the sound of heels warned of Alana’s return, “I didn’t know you followed the opera.”

“I don’t,” Will shrugged inside his coat.

He had only looked it up in a desperate attempt to find something he thought Lecter would appreciate. What came next, however, made him reconsider not only his gift but almost everything else as well.

“If you are looking for a way to repay me, Will, while quite unnecessary,” Lecter said softly, leaning in as Alana turned the corner, fishing in her handbag, “I think something more pleasurable for the both of us would be better, don’t you?”

“Sorry I was so long, I left it in the kitchen and spent five minutes scouring the living room,” Alana said as she zipped her handbag closed; when she looked up it was to find Will staring at Lecter in what appeared to be incredulity while the other simply looked his usual demure self. Alana looked back and forth between them before asking a question with, as yet, no answer that Will knew of, “what did I miss?”

It sat with him during breakfast. Toast and cream cheese with a boiled egg on the side. It sat with him in the shower. Lukewarm water as he had forgotten to turn the overnight tank on the night before. It picked at him as he shaved. One cut due to distraction followed by the aftershave Lecter detested so very much. By the time he got round to feeding the dogs Will was sick fed up of the thought altogether.

“He’s only messing with me,” Will said as the dogs ate messily, Buster choking down his food too fast as he always did, “he likes to tease me. God knows why. But that’s all, right?”

Winston stared at him from over his empty bowl, his ears up and eyes alert. Will snorted at the dog’s keen face and reached out to ruffle the fur around his neck, scratching his ear. Damn, I have to over think everything don’t I? he thought. He knows I don’t like opera, that’s all, he was just being considerate. Yet the sentiment wasn’t the only thing that made Will antsy. Lecter’s body language had been odd. Will remembered how closely he had leaned in towards him, creating a small bubble of being separate from Alana and the rest of the world. I’m his patient, Will argued back against his raging intuition, and he’s my friend; don’t run away with your imagination.

When the phone burst into life Will jumped, having been lost in thought. He shook his head and sighed at his own agitated behaviour. Picking up the phone he read Crawford's name on the display.

"Graham," he answered.

"Will," Jack sounded animated, "I need you in the office in forty minutes."

"Earliest I can do is forty five if I leave now," Will said, walking quickly to the bedroom to grab his bag and shoes; Crawford's energetic mood always meant no messing around, "what's happened?"

"A man walking his dog found Nicholas Boyle's body in the middle of a field three hours ago," Will felt an inexplicable cold feeling settle in his stomach as he pulled on his shoes, "I've already called Dr. Lecter and Dr. Bloom. I want you in here ASAP."

Altérité

Chapter Notes

Apologies in advance to The Lurker Below for love triangle angst. I promise it won't get too heavy!

Title translation: 'Otherness'

“Nicholas Boyle turned up in Minnesota,” Jack slammed a brown folder down onto his desk, “dead. His body was found in the woods; it was frozen.”

When Will arrived at Jack’s office he was simply completing the quartet. Alana and Lecter were already present, the former looking alert and the latter disquieted. Will had taken a spot near the door, away from the action so to speak, and leaned against a large, brown cabinet while he listened.

“They thawed him out pretty quickly,” Jack continued, “but they say they can’t tell if he died a week ago, six weeks ago or the night that he disappeared.”

“How did he die?” Alana asked.

“Knife wound,” Jack said “he was gutted.”

The familiar pull of intuition snaked in his gut. Will tried to kick it away. Gutted: a hunter’s knife; Abigail’s guilt mixed in with her fear and anger. Links in a chain. He refused to hear it. There wasn’t enough evidence for such an extreme theory, not yet. If there ever was, Will wasn’t even sure what he would do with it. He looked up at Hannibal but the man was too busy looking at Jack.

“I’ve had the body flown down here,” Crawford continued, “I want Abigail Hobbs to identify it for us.”

What? Will thought, looking at Jack with quiet outrage.

“But you already have a positive ID,” Hannibal quickly countered; he sounded as keen on the idea as Will felt.

“Not from Abigail Hobbs,” Jack said as if that explained everything.

Things were trying to click into place in his mind but Will wouldn’t let them. It seems they already have in Jack though, he thought. The scent of Crawford’s eagerness was overpowering. Will wished Hannibal would speak up more but the man seemed to be deep in thought. Instead, Will spoke up for them both.

“Jack, this is nuts,” Will cut in, “Abigail’s convalescing for god’s sakes. The last thing she needs is nightmare fuel.”

“You can’t put her in a room with Nick Boyle’s body,” Alana agreed, calmly angry, “Will’s right, she already has nightmares about him Jack. He attacked her, he attacked me! Should she have to relive that in the worst way possible? By seeing his corpse?”

“I want to see her reaction,” Crawford said, leaking more and more of his reason out into the room, “I’m curious about why she has these nightmares at all.”

“Wait,” Will scoffed, his assessment of Crawford coming true, “You can’t think that she has something to do with this.”

“I think Abigail Hobbs is the common denominator between her father, Marissa Schurr and Nicholas Boyle,” Jack said as Will sighed and shook his head, “it all goes back to her. My instinct tells me that Abigail has answers that we have not heard.”

“Well what are the *questions*, Jack?”

He didn’t get angry often, not as himself. He did on a case, he did when he was in too deep to see his way back out, he had before Hannibal had taken his hand and led him back up to the surface. So it spoke volumes that he was angry now, and he showed it. Even Alana looked a little surprised by how vocal Will was being. Jack didn’t seem to care; he continued regardless.

“Let’s start with where she goes when she climbs the walls of the psychiatric facility,” Crawford offered with the tone of a man with an ace in his hand.

“When she what?” Will frowned in confusion.

“Well, it seems that you are not as up to date on our shared problem as everyone else,” Jack said condescendingly, making Will bristle.

“Did you know about this?” he looked at Alana and Hannibal together.

“Yes,” Alana said after a moment’s hesitation, looking apologetic, “I thought you did too.”

Hannibal stayed quiet. Will pushed his lips into a tight line and felt suddenly as if he had no authority to speak at this meeting. Why would Abigail leave Port Haven in the middle of the night? Will could think of lots of reasons, all of them leading to bad places. Unfortunately, Jack was more than happy to voice his ideas.

“Maybe she was meeting Nicholas Boyle. None of us really know what was going on between them.”

“I want to go on record saying this is a very bad idea,” Alana said, effectively stopping Jack from going any further, “Hannibal?”

The man in question looked to Alana as if coming out of a trance. He raised his eyebrows and took a breath, “Jack has the look of a man with no interest in any opinion but his own”. It was

true but it was also passive. Will bit at the inside of his lip and wondered why Hannibal wasn't more upset about this situation. Will knew he cared for Abigail, he could see it in Hannibal's smile when he looked at her. Still, there was no more forthcoming and Jack spoke up.

"I want you to observe on this Alana"

"If you're putting Abigail in a room with a body," Will said defiantly, standing up from his place against the cupboard, moving out into the active arena, "I want to be there."

"I'm sorry, Will," Will's already bristled skin shivered with dislike considering Crawford sounded actively unapologetic, "I am not confident with your ability to be objective about Abigail Hobbs right now. Alana."

Alana was angrier at Jack than she was letting on. Will could see it in her closed face and strict walk. She reached out as she passed Will and put a quick, comforting hand against his arm. Will nodded to her; it was appreciated. She and Jack left the room quiet but charged. Will looked at Hannibal as he walked forwards slowly and peered down at Jack's desk, seemingly unseeing.

"He could do Abigail *irreparable* damage exposing her to this," Will said, gesturing severely; he could hear the intense emotion in his voice and tried to calm down.

"Perhaps she is stronger than we think," Hannibal said.

"Oh, *now* you have something to say," Will said facetiously.

"An unfair comment," Hannibal said, looking to Will with no emotion discernible, "I knew I could not change his mind. It was set."

"That's hardly the point," Will said, one hand on his hip, the other rubbing at his face, "we're supposed to protect her, not give up before we've even started."

"Believe me, Will," Hannibal said seriously, "all I have ever done for Abigail I have done to protect her."

"Then help me change Jack's mind," Will said; his own mind screamed back at him, *why can't you see*, but he talked over it, "this has got to stop or Abby will never have peace."

Shit, Will thought as he realised what he was doing. He was too close, that's what Jack had basically said to him, too close and too involved; and now he was proving it to himself. Hannibal was watching him steadily. The office suddenly felt small and confining. Will took a breath and secured his thoughts. Hannibal opened his mouth but will cut him off.

"I know," he said, "I *know*. Just don't, alright?"

"As you wish," Hannibal said; Will thought his words were merely condescension dressed up in conciliation, "do you want to wait for her?"

"No. If Jack doesn't want me to see her then I won't get to see her."

“Giving up before you’ve even started?” Hannibal asked, eyebrow raised.

I have enough bullshit to deal with, I don’t need yours on top of that pile. That was what Will wanted to say. Only his slim veneer of restraint held him back from a passive aggressive shouting match with Hannibal Lecter in Jack Crawford’s office; he being the aggressive and Lecter the passive. Only not so much, Will thought as he instead gave Hannibal a significant look that read I’m-pissed-at-you-but-won’t-make-a-scene-here. Hannibal was anything but passive. Hannibal got it, Will knew as he turned and left. He knew because Lecter’s face had shifted, eyes narrowing and jaw tightening. Will knew he should apologise but spitefully thought that Lecter owed him one back. One he was sure he would never see.

It turned into a long day. Will was marking papers from ten until twelve. Then he had a meeting with one of his students, Gerry Dwight, about advancing into forensics or taking a chance and a job offer in BPD homicide. It was a difficult conversation to have, mainly because he didn’t think it was his place to help Dwight but also because his mind was still caught on Abigail. He couldn’t stop thinking about how she was, how she must be feeling, about how she would have reacted. Whether she was upset. *Whether she looked guilty*. Will dropped the pen he had been twirling in his fingers at the rogue thought.

“You were in the police, right Mr. Graham?” Dwight was asking him as Will came back up from grabbing the pen from the floor.

“Yes,” Will said, putting the pen in the holder on his desk.

“Sorry if this is a stupid question,” Will felt like saying he was used to those but stopped himself, “but why did you leave?”

“I got stabbed,” Will said, no-nonsense. Dwight had the good grace to wince, breaking the rare eye contact Will would give to a relative stranger; he sighed, tapping the desk with his fingertips, “look, there were lots of reasons why I decided to come here. One being that I wouldn’t be so active in the field.”

Shit lot of good that did, he thought. He was sure Dwight was thinking the same thing.

“It depends what you want,” Will said, standing up from his chair to signal the end of the meeting whether Dwight wanted it or not, “I think your best bet would be a meeting with your advisor as well as your section head and the chief of the district that’s poaching you. Don’t get me wrong, they’ll all sugar coat it. Just...think about what they say.”

“Ok,” Dwight said, standing and moving to the door that Will opened for him; a not so subtle ‘get out’ without saying it, “thanks for seeing me. I appreciate it.”

A day that moved into thinking about times gone by and things lost. Will didn’t like those days. He preferred looking forwards. Looking backwards was reserved for hunting clues on cases and periods of depression. His watch signalled a sanity check and Will took his new pills, smaller than the last. Took them with water so that Lecter couldn’t gripe at him for

taking them dry. His mind still ticked over, didn't stop until the work day drew closed. Now he was stuck walking down to the parking lot, each stair step a casual memory of his time at the NOPD.

He had been a good detective in homicide. No, he had been a damn good detective. Only no one wanted to work with him and, after a while, Will didn't want to work with any of them either. *No one likes a smartass*, was his Captain's favourite saying as Will left his office. He liked that Will kept the numbers up and the collars coming in, but he hated Will's superiority and his standoffishness; his 'psychic abilities'. He'd been out on his own chasing a lead when the woman he'd gone to visit turned on him. He felt the knife go in but didn't feel much after that until he had her subdued and the EMTs were on their way. Then it had started to burn. He had wanted to pull it out but couldn't, knew it would only start the blood flowing. The woman had been lying on the ground where he had cuffed her, face down, crying brokenly as he slid down the wall and huffed out his breaths. He had thought he was going to die there in that ratty apartment to the sound of fragile tears and sirens. Somehow he felt that the Captain thought he had been taught a lesson more than anything else. When he had the chance to transfer to the Academy he took it without a second thought.

The parking lot was cold and mainly empty. Will irrationally scanned the few cars for the black Bentley but it wasn't there. Why Hannibal would still be there he didn't know but he wouldn't have minded seeing him. He was a good distraction from distant thoughts. God, Will shook his head, what the hell's the matter with you? Can't go a full day without thinking about him, can you.

I think something more pleasurable for the both of us would be better, don't you?

Will felt like telling his conscience to fuck off. He had enough to worry about without bringing that up. He heard a car door open as he walked, his shoes scuffing the concrete and keys jingling in his hand. He looked up as the quick footsteps grew closer, hurrying. Will turned around just in time to have a tape recorder shoved in his face and his photo taken. He stepped back awkwardly, slamming into the car behind him and reaching out to steady himself on the bonnet.

"For chist's sake, what the hell is wrong with you?" he snapped as Freddie shoved her camera into her pocket but continued to hold the recorder up as if it were a badge, "And how did you even get in here?"

"New guy on the barrier," Freddie shrugged, looking smug with a small smirk, quickly continuing with, "Just looking for a comment on Nick Boyle. I hear he was found in a field dead with his guts ripped out. Does the FBI have a suspect or are you just as clueless as with the Ripper murders?"

"Goodbye, Freddie," Will said acidly, giving her a look that would make grass wilt before he turned away.

"So Abigail Hobbs isn't on the list then?" Freddie's voice rose and Will could hear her heels following him as he walked, "She was attacked by him, wasn't she? And his sister was killed by her father. Seems only natural she might want him dead."

Suckered in; Will knew it as soon as Freddie brought up Abigail. Son of a bitch, he thought as he turned violently on his heel, making Freddie come to a quick halt and take a step back. He wasn't sure if it was the anger obvious in his face or the fact that she was essentially alone with him, but Freddie looked cautious. Underneath her usual persona of smothering, obnoxious arrogance that was.

"And to think she trusts you," Will said, not paying attention to the recorder as the digital readout climbed higher, "what did you tell her, huh? That you'd make sure she was exonerated in the eyes of the world? That you could make people pity her rather than hate her?"

"I didn't promise anything I can't deliver," Freddie said conceitedly, "I make a compelling argument, can turn someone's opinion on a dime. That's why they hired me and that's why Abigail asked me for help. Not you."

Enough. He'd had *enough*. Will smiled cruelly, making Freddie blink. She thought she was clever, careful, but she was an open book to him. Most people were.

"That's what you think, is it?" he said with a short laugh; he looked at her like a wasp sinking in the honey, "They hired you because you were happy to write up the Cancer Column, playing people so desperate they'd read shit spread on the pavement if it offered a cure. Sold your damn soul for a way out of the local journalism racket. Long nights, was it Freddie, dreaming about the Washington Post and the New York Times? Of getting your own byline for the PRISM scandal or that international correspondent slot? Only they all turned you down, didn't they, even the Tribune and the LA Times. How many rejections before you stopped sending the CVs in? How long before you realised that they called you gutsy to your face but wouldn't drink with you at the bar, no matter how often you went there hoping to catch an eye or make a friend on the inside. How long before you realised you'd never get to the White House with a press pass?"

She looked like she'd walked into her room to find her little brother reading her diary. She had gone pale, hardened up; her eyes, her face, her hand around the recorder. Will revelled in the feeling for as long as he could have it, knowing the consequences of analysing Freddie Lounds would only be dire for him.

"I am a good journalist," she said tightly, trying to keep up her blasé front but losing, "and I don't need you to..."

"Oh but you do need me, Freddie," Will said calmly, "because without people like me you're just a washed up has-been at thirty two, with no boyfriend because he left you after the switch from real journalism to schlock, right? No, wait, not boyfriend," her eyes blazed as his eyes flickered over the faint ring mark on her ring finger, left hand, "fiancé. Wow, that must've stung. Sorry that didn't work out for you Freddie, I can only imagine that he figured you out before it was too late.

"The *Tattler* gave you *Tattlecrime* as a spin-off because they just love that you are willing to do anything for a pay-packet. Because deep down, under the conceited mess your life has become, living in that sterile, two room apartment with nothing but half empty take out boxes and old underwear on the dryer to come home to, you wish you could just show them all

what a success you'll be one day. I have some news for you, Freddie," Will said, taking a step forwards and putting his mouth directly over the microphone, "don't quit your damn day job."

He thought he heard her say something as he walked to his car with a long stride, his shoes sharp on the hard floor, but didn't register it. He didn't turn until he was sitting in his car and, even then, that was only to find the seatbelt. He checked in the rear view mirror to make sure she wasn't behind him as he backed out. He didn't want to add injury to insult.

It was freezing and the sun had already gone down when Will herded his pack back to the house. They scampered inside happily, Sasha shaking herself all over the living room, spraying muddy snow over the floor. Will let out a semi-affectionate "*ahh*" before fetching the mop from the cupboard. He shed his coat and his jumper, shifting the dogs into the kitchen area before cleaning up the mess of paw prints and water puddles. They all sat or lay quietly as they waited for the nightly tin can ritual.

Only Lady didn't wolf her food down. She sat, ears drooping, and sniffed at the brown mound of meat chunks in her bowl. Will walked over and poked the bowl towards her. She backed up and walked away, her feet a little unsteady. He watched her with concern.

"Hey bud," he said as he followed her to the living room where she sat down on the rug; he took a seat next to her and stroked her head softly, "what's wrong, huh?"

Lady put her head down onto her small white paws and blinked her dark eyes. Will sighed, stroking her curly fur and feeling a little helpless. Another trip to the vets. Will was used to it, the disadvantage that came more frequently with taking in strays, but was never thrilled when it rolled around. Not only did the dogs hate it but he could never predict the bill; except of course to predict that it would be extortionate. His pay check wasn't exactly stellar as it was.

"Don't worry," he said as he continued to push his fingers through the thick curls, hearing lady make her happy grunt as he scratched the skin under her collar, "I'll get you sorted out."

He picked her up and carried her through to the bedroom, putting her down into her basket. Will began to wonder if that was his duty, to sort out people with troubled lives. He thought about Abigail and then forced himself to stop. His mind automatically flitted to Hannibal. Will grit his teeth and turned on the stereo. He blasted some Led Zepplin for a few hours while he pulled out the old boat motor he'd been working on. Dealing with something intricate took up all the space he was able to give at one time. No space for anything else. The way he needed it right now.

At eleven he let the dogs back out for a last bathroom break before bed. He stood on the porch and breathed in the frozen air, the light from the house streaming out onto the snow, making it seem grey in the gloom. The stars were out in full force. Will looked up at the winking sky. He refused to wish on any of them.

That night his dreams were fragmented. Not an illusion or an imagining. More a mosaic of memories, torn out of the patchwork fabric and stitched haphazardly together. The material dreamscape shifted in waves. He thought he saw Abigail's face, worried, distressed. She spoke to him, *what did it feel like, to kill?* and heard his reply, *it's ugly, Abigail, the ugliest of things*, then another spoke, *we will be there to help you with the nightmares, we will be here for you*. Hannibal, it was Hannibal's voice.

Will woke up, blinking at the ceiling. He frowned, annoyed, and automatically glanced at the clock. Four fifty three. Will let out a gruff sound and rolled over, shifting his legs to pillow the duvet between them. He felt hot but his nightclothes were blessedly dry. He fell back into fitful sleep to a dream he could not wake from even though he wanted to. He needed to find Abigail, he needed to ask her something important. He found himself surrounded by dark haired girls but when he touched their shoulder they would turn around to reveal a stranger's face. Will searched until morning, his outlook grim.

It stayed that way on the drive into work. It was bothering him; *gutted, hunter's knife, Abigail's guilty face, her escapes over the hospital wall at night*. He pulled into the car park and drove to his spot, jerking the handbrake stiffly up. He sat in his car for five minutes, biting the inside of his cheek and trying desperately to think of another explanation. His intuition scoffed back at him. Will swallowed down the sick taste in his throat and opened the door.

"Well if it isn't the man himself," Beverly said as she stood in the morgue, not looking up at him as she scribbled something quickly on a clipboard.

"Have I done something?" Will asked, slowing his walk; he hated the chill in the morgue.

"Only that Jack was just here about three minutes ago, you just missed him," she added, "and he said not to let you anywhere near the Boyle boy."

"He said that?" Will frowned, agitated, "Why?"

"He doesn't want you in on this one," Beverly said, looking at him as if to apologise, "thinks you're a bit too close."

"Well," Will said, putting his hands in his pockets, "it's always nice to be insulted first thing in the morning."

"Why leave it till afternoon?" Beverly smiled, "Just gives you indigestion at lunch."

Will laughed through a closed-lipped smile. He liked Beverly; she was supremely down to earth. And she made him laugh. She was part of a select group that could. I need to see that body, Will thought, or this feeling will never leave me. That tempered the short reprieve of happiness brought about by the smile. He cleared his throat and Beverly looked at him again, having continued with her work.

"You know how you said that I could ask you for a favour?" Will said, trying for obvious subterfuge; the more obvious it was, the lighter it would be taken.

“Oh, no,” she said warily, shaking her pen, “that favour was meant to include things like *not* crossing Crawford and getting strung up for my troubles.

“Please, Beverly,” Will said seriously, making her look at him curiously, “I just need five minutes. Jack doesn’t have to know about it.”

“Too right he doesn’t have to know about it,” Beverly said, “because it’s not happening. Come on, you’re in enough stick with him as it is without lighting the fire-paper.”

“I need to know if this is the Copycat killer,” it was a lie but, with the amount of gravity Will put into his words he knew it was a good lie; Beverly hesitated, “if he killed Marissa Schurr he could have killed Boyle too. You know that I’ll know. If it is and we miss it this could set the investigation back months. I just need to look. Five minutes.”

Beverly swithering on a decision was not unlike Beverly any other moment of the day. She was unconsciously hard to read, Will thought. Eventually, she sighed and shook her head. Will felt his shoulder’s loosen.

“Alright,” she said, “but Jack is having Jimmy look at him in fifteen, then this place is going to get busy. Come back down at the end of the day and I’ll make sure you can see him, ok? Five minutes.”

“Five minutes,” Will nodded; it would be all he needed.

The day seemed longer than the previous one by hours. Minutes dragged and seconds sat still. He worked on the Wells case as well as he could but the nagging thoughts in his mind kept him separate from the Second Killer. Will found himself tapping his foot on the ground as he shovelled his cold lunch into his mouth, swallowing without tasting. Six o’clock couldn’t come fast enough.

“Ok,” Beverly let him in through the locked door; she must have stayed behind with the code, Will thought.

“Thank you for this,” he said as she pointed him to one of the curtained examining areas, “really.”

“The last thing I want is for us to slip up because Jack was cranky today,” she said, “we don’t have long.”

Will nodded before quickly walking behind the curtain and pulling it closed. Even though time was of the essence he couldn’t help but stare at the boy on the cold steel tray. Boyle was badly marked from an autopsy already performed, his pale skin now greyish white, his hair still a vibrant ginger puffing out from his skull. Will remembered seeing him alive, across the small river for only a few seconds as he fled from Abigail’s words and Marissa’s stones. He took his place at the side of the corpse and looked down. The green sheet was easily pulled back to reveal the thick, now black laceration across his abdomen. Will licked his lips. It fit; hesitation marks, the cut jagged in the flesh. It puckered out slightly, as if the knife was trying to be removed even as it was pulled across, effectively gutting him. An experienced hunter’s hand had done this, yet an inexperienced killer’s mind had been behind it. Will looked

quickly at the rest of the body while he grabbed the autopsy report from the holder at the end of the slab. Nothing much more to report, some post mortem bruising along the arms, livor mortis along his left side showing he was held there for a long time after his death. Will realised his hands were shaking when the words began to jump on the page.

This was not the Copycat's design, which had been his only fallback, weak as it was. He closed his eyes. When he looked up he was faced with Abigail, close to him, nearly touching, her dark hair framing her pale face. Her wide eyes were fearful. He knew what would come but didn't want to believe it was true. Will felt the knife go in and a need to gasp. He could see everything in her face, the fear, the anger, the hurt. The guilt. The hesitation in her hand even as she knew just where to cut him. Will looked down and watched the blade in its path across his abdomen, blood pouring out to soak into his grey shirt. *Oh god*, he thought, *oh god*. He opened his eyes and slowed his rapid breathing, dismissing the illusion as much as he could from the backs of his eyelids. He looked at Nicholas Boyle's serene face. Will put the report back in its slot. He whispered a quick '*I'm sorry*' as he flashed out from behind the curtain. Beverly looked to him and her face instantly fell to concern.

"Are you ok?" she asked, "What did you see?"

"Jack doesn't need to know about this, right?" Will said, his voice hard; Beverly nodded, "Then it's best you don't either."

He brisk walked up the stairs, through the lobby and out into the car park. The worst part of realising his intuition had been right all along: Abigail was now a murderer. The second worst part: his best friend was now a liar.

"Hello Will."

Something choral was playing as Will walked into Hannibal's office. The lights were low, creating a theatrical spotlight around Hannibal at his desk, showing his intent, calm features in detail. Automatically he had wanted to chastise the man for leaving his front door unlocked, again. He would have on any other visit. Only this wasn't any other visit. He could feel his hands tightening and loosening at his sides as he looked to the desk. He couldn't feel the emotion, not yet, not while Hannibal kept his eyes upon his task. He was sketching something artfully onto a large sheet of cream paper. Will opened his mouth to speak and felt a need to hold his breath to stop the words coming out.

"Abigail Hobbs killed Nicholas Boyle."

The scratch of lead on paper stopped. The music continued. Hannibal finally looked up at him and Will suddenly felt his sheer fury rise to the fore, followed swiftly by a crushing sense of betrayal. He could see it in his eyes even before Hannibal spoke, feel it in his hesitation to answer. Will felt sick.

"Yes," Hannibal said, "I know."

I know, I know. The words seemed to echo. Will looked down as he walked stiffly forwards, holding in his raging anger as he managed to squeeze out, “Tell me why you know?” his tone a facsimile of calm interest.

“I...helped her dispose of the body,” Hannibal said as he twirled his pencil.

The betrayal crushed tighter, enough to make his chest ache. Will did not still his feet, continuing his walk slowly across the room while his heart mirrored his footsteps. The only words he could find did not seem appropriate but, if his tone was taken into account, adequately expressed his vehemence. “Evidently,” he said, his words individually spilt from his lips, encased in ire, “not well enough.”

I don’t believe this is happening, he thought as Hannibal placed his pencil down on the desk, *I don’t*. He felt abruptly numb. In the space of a few hours Abigail had become a murderer and Hannibal a liar. Now in the space of a few minutes Hannibal had become a criminal. He stared at the man and felt his mind waver.

“Have you told Jack Crawford?” Hannibal, continuing his uncharacteristic behaviour, sounded faintly worried.

Will hesitated. He wanted to continue his crusade but realised that his reply only made his behaviour suspicious. The word came out like an admission of guilt, “No,” he shook his head.

“Why not?” Hannibal asked simply.

Why not? Everything seemed to double up in his mind. Will felt the lack of sensation reach his voice and was only able to murmur out his reply. Hannibal seemed to have to strain to hear it at all.

“Because,” Will said quietly, sadly, “I was hoping it wasn’t true.”

Cracked, everything was cracked. Flawed. Yesterday he had been fine, hadn’t he? He had been happy. Things had been looking up. Nothing lasts, he thought, nothing stays as a constant. Everyone shifts around me in and out of suits designed to confuse, keep my eyes from seeing them. Hannibal looked down, shuffling some things on his desk, including the scalpel he used to sharpen his pencils.

“Well,” he said in his matter-of-fact tone, “now you know the truth.” The very tone made Will flinch, made him want to walk to the desk, take Hannibal by his perfect shirt collar with one hand and strike him with the other. It was a loathsome feeling and Will pushed it away even as he thought it justified. Instead he pulled further on his reserves of incredulity.

“Do I?” Will asked with a humourless laugh in his voice.

“Everything you know about that night is true except the end,” Lecter vowed as he stood from his chair, his face a picture of the penitent man, “Nicholas Boyle attacked us and Abigail defended herself. My only crime was to lie about it.”

“Your *only* crime?” Will said disbelievingly, “You mean other than obstruction of justice and, if Jack is feeling pretty unforgiving, accomplice to murder?”

“But you have not told Jack,” Hannibal said, watching him carefully, “and no matter what the law thinks of me, it had to be done.”

Will could only think of one word that summed up his feelings at that moment in time: “*Why*?” he asked, stunned.

Hannibal let out a small chuff of breath and shook his head, “You know why,” he said as if it were entirely obvious and Will was simply being petulant.

Will turned away towards the windows, the outside world invisible past the long strips of cloth as the darkness swallowed it. The words struck a chord; Hannibal was playing an unknown tune upon the string between them. Will thought he heard a snorted breath from behind him, the pawing clop of a hoof. His back muscles shook at the sound, like wind blowing through piled up leaves on the pavement.

Yes he knew. He knew why because it *was* obvious, yet Will did not want to acknowledge that. Hannibal continued despite Will’s understanding, “because Jack Crawford would hang her for what her father has done, and the world would burn Abigail in his place, that would be the story. That would be what Freddie Lounds writes.” Will tried to look at him, tried to force his gaze over his shoulder into that penitent face. Only he couldn’t seem to bring himself to do so. Instead he found the wherewithal in his mind to walk to the window. He could almost hear Hannibal behind him, fidgeting. Will felt a dreamy sense of disillusionment fall through him, like ink through water, spreading its tendrils. Hannibal does not fidget, Will thought as his thoughts ran away with themselves, and Abigail does not kill and I do not lie and Jack does not forgive and...

“Abigail’s no more a murderer than you are for shooting her father,” Lecter’s voice came from somewhere over his right shoulder.

“It isn’t our place to decide,” Will said, his forehead creased in incredulity and his voice strong.

“If not ours, then whose?” Hannibal countered quickly, making Will’s mind race; *how can he say that?* “Who knows Abigail better than you and I? Or the burden she bears. We are her fathers now; we have to serve her better than Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

Don’t put me on your level, the self-righteous part of his brain screamed. We are already on his level, the emotional part said in reply. I killed him, the emotion spoke, I killed her father to save her life. That’s not *the same*! the righteousness shot back. I saved her life, I saved her future. The face of Garrett Hobbs loomed in his mind’s eye like a revenant, come to take him to hell. Will could see Hannibal beyond, standing in his well cut suit with Nicholas Boyle’s lifeless, bloody corpse in his arms. There are smears of blood upon his hands and cuffs. Abigail stands beside him, her eyes downcast. Her face is tearstained but she is not crying. Everything became clearer and clearer until Will could not stand it.

The analytical part of his brain took over before his world cracked and broke irreparably.

Facts, it demanded. Nicholas Boyle entered the Hobbs household that night and attacked Alana Bloom, then went downstairs and attacked Abigail. She defended herself. The cut could be consistent with that. It had shown Boyle was moving towards her and not the other way around, as the rounded entry wound from the knife demonstrated. Hannibal had found her with the body; he had been shocked, *but not that shocked* his mind supplied unhelpfully, and decided in that second to keep Abigail safe rather than honour Nicholas. He had probably wrapped him in a rug, or perhaps there would have still been tarpaulin in the garage, Will was sure he had seen some. Placed on his side in the back of the Bentley in between the emergency toolbox and...no, no Lecter would not put Boyle in his car. The man was too careful for that. He would have found another way, some other way to transport him to the gravesite.

The fear and the pain and the guilt. Will thought he heard a voice speak but it was lost to his ears, filled as they were with his own voice analysing the scene. His analysis sparked to the crux of the matter and he could not see anything but that. Abigail had not wanted to kill him. Will knew this, no matter how it fell out or what Hannibal's story had been. He knew she had not wanted to kill. She had done it out of fear. She had been attacked. She had been through a traumatic event, losing both her parents, nearly dying herself, discovering her father was a killer. She was protecting herself.

Hannibal had not wanted to hide a body; he had done it out of sheer necessity. An obligation to one young life over another which had already been lost. It would have been difficult to dig in frozen ground but Hannibal was broadly built, powerful swimmer's shoulders. It was possible, entirely possible, only it wasn't what his mind wanted to see. Hannibal was not the kind of criminal Will was used to chasing. Lecter's heart was decidedly open to him. A cold, analytical kindness with depths below that loomed so far down into the abyss Will could not see them in the light from the top; which only made it all the harder to condemn him. Everything felt new as if it fazed back in to reality.

"Do I need to call my lawyer Will?"

The sentence caught him off guard, seeming overly close and crisp as compared to the muffled showground of his mind's eye. He looked round as if rushing up from deep waters, breaking the surface as he finally found Hannibal's eyes. Will stared at him. He looked worried. Will did not think he had ever seen the man look so very worried; and there was something else. Something behind that worry. Will could not see it, just as he could not see the painful flaw in Hannibal's actions through his own murder of Garret Jacob Hobbs. Just as he could not see the depths at the bottom of the abyss.

He has saved Abigail's future. *That's not for us to decide*.

If Jack finds out her life is over. *There are consequences to every action*.

She is not her father. *She is not your daughter*.

It was difficult to move his neck, as if the joints and muscles had seized up like a bike left out in the rain. It made the movements jerky, unnatural, as he slowly shook his head twice from side to side. He could not voice it, that made it too real. As it was, Will settled for shaking his

head and watching Hannibal's eyes relax. He looked relieved. Will couldn't truly blame him, in more ways than one.

"We can tell no-one."

"No-one," Will whispered in echo.

It was added to 'nothing' in his library of words to avoid due to their dire association. It was telling that it was the beginnings of a list, a semantic memory of events he did not want to recall. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. Two soft steps towards him and there was a hand on his right shoulder, then another on his left. He was turned slowly, the pressure of fingers through his jacket comforting. Will opened his eyes and looked up when the silence became unbearable. Hannibal looked down at him with an inscrutable eye; Will replied with resignation.

"We are doing the right thing," Hannibal said.

"Yes," Will said softly, "but at the same time the wrong thing. Right now it's all about which weighs the most."

"Miscarriage of justice is repulsive," Hannibal said, forebodingly.

"Not as repulsive as killing."

"And not as repulsive as the death of a loved one," Hannibal countered, "Boyle attacked Abigail with the intent to kill. Would you have rather she had died at his hand?"

"*No*," Will said with angry incredulity, as if disgusted with Hannibal for even suggesting it.

He closed his eyes and screwed up the skin around them, shaking his head. You're taking his word for it, his conscience spoke, but he's lied to you before. How would you know the difference? Hannibal's hands were like anchors, still tying him tightly to the issue, keeping him grounded. He wanted to shake them off but couldn't bring himself to lose that connection. I would know, he thought, I would know, wouldn't I? The man's calm, controlled demeanour was domineering. Will soaked it in, reutilising it as a coping mechanism.

"This just isn't what I wanted for her," Will said, blinking open his eyes once more, "I wanted to keep her safe and...I couldn't."

"And I did not wish to become an obstruction of justice or an accomplice to murder or any other label Crawford would wish to throw at me," Hannibal said calmly, "but I would wear them gladly if it meant knowing my conscience was clear."

"That's some conscience you've got there," Will was amazed at himself for joking at a time like this, feeling his limbs relaxing slowly.

"It is in tune with those I care about," Hannibal said, "the oboe to my orchestra of thought."

"I would watch out for bum notes," Will said, feeling tired, unconsciously leaning forwards.

“An impossibility,” Hannibal replied, allowing his hands to slip over shoulders and across the soft folds of Will’s jacket as he moved.

Will allowed himself to be held for as long as he could deny that he had put himself there. A soft heartbeat pumped against his ear, through his cheek pressed against the stiff material of Hannibal’s waistcoat and his neck against the soft cloth of his shirt. He felt it as Lecter pulled in a deep breath, his chest expanding. The heartbeat skipped into staccato before slipping back to allegro. Will pulled back slowly, allowing Hannibal to lower his arms. He did not look into the man’s eyes even though he could feel them upon him like a physical touch.

A sound from the balcony. Will looked up in surprise and was given surprise in return; Abigail’s eyes were wide, a deer in the headlights as she crept in through the window. Hannibal sighed, placing his hands in his pockets.

“Hello Abigail,” he said much in the same tone with which he had welcomed Will.

Will chose a basket rather than a cart, slipping the plastic handles over his arm. He only needed a few things and didn’t want to be there any longer than need be.

The supermarket was artificially bright and the music tinny and distant. He breathed in sterile air and disinfectant as he walked through the clothing clustered at the front door and up towards the fresh produce aisle. The early Easter sales banners were already up, cluttering the ceiling and the crown end displays. A large white rabbit held up an egg with a happy chick breaking out, egg shell flying in the air like shrapnel. *GET READY FOR CRACKING DEALS IN OUR EASTER SALES! Apr. 1st – 7th* read the large red lettering, nauseating against the lemon yellow background. Will skirted the rearranged aisles which were being switched around in order to make way for the seasonal stock. Valentines is only just over and done with, Will thought as he shook his head, and now this is brought in its place.

The skin on the potatoes was wrinkled and slightly loose. Old, Will thought, and probably wet too. He put them back and thought about what else he could have with chicken chasseur. He looked up the long low containers of vegetables, vibrant in their myriad colours. He was just about to walk up towards the roots and brassicas when he heard it.

“*No it is, isn’t it? Him off that website..?*”

Will stiffened and turned his head over his shoulder. For a split second he thought he might have misheard, or maybe just misunderstood. Only the two women who had walked past were looking right at him when he caught their eye. They looked away with only the guilt of those caught snooping, not through any prick of moral conscience. Will watched them go and felt the creeping snake of exposure wrap around his middle. It made his stomach cramp up. Website meant only one thing. He grabbed the bag of potatoes he had put back and the couple of onions and carrots he needed, then headed straight for the checkout.

All the self-service were busy and with a queue to boot. Will swallowed and felt as if everyone that looked his way was watching him. He hadn’t had this before, not like this.

What the hell did she write this time? Will thought, And how many people read that load of crap? He fidgeted in the line, enough that he couldn't stand it anymore. He walked briskly to the first checkout with only one person in front of him. They scanned through quickly and Will put his items on the conveyor belt. It shifted with a mild and repetitious squeak. The cashier was young, maybe nineteen; mousy brown hair pulled back into a high ponytail and gaunt face freckled across her nose. Will was aware she was watching him as she weighed his purchases, not even having to look at what she was doing.

"Hey, you're Will Graham right?"

"Excuse me?" Will said defensively as he handed her a twenty dollar bill.

"I recognise your picture offa *tattlecrime*, you know, the website?" she said, her smile coming out with the hint of a leer, "you're cuter in real life."

"I don't need a bag," Will said stiffly as she started bagging his items automatically; she looked at him blithely with a shrug; Will felt he should have just let her continue when she took even longer pulling everything out the bag and pushing them down onto the end of the checkout.

"It's a shame what she said..." the cashier was saying as Will grabbed his things awkwardly in one arm and snatched his change with the other, "*hey*."

He was gone before she could continue. He realised he was driving with his foot pressed a little too heavy on the gas and actively slowed. When he pulled up the driveway he didn't even remember his groceries which he had dumped in the backseat. He walked straight to his laptop, past Winston who had come to greet him, and opened it. As it was booting he let out a sound of aggravation and, when it reached the password login, pressed for shutdown.

Whatever trash Freddie Lounds wanted to write about him he was happy to make sure he would never add to her hit count.

He had held her much as Hannibal had held him, although she seemed much more willing to accept the comfort. Abigail sniffed as Will stroked her hair.

"I didn't want you to know," she said, her voice wavering.

"But you knew I'd figure it out," Will said as Hannibal returned from the kitchen, placing a tray of a tea pot, cups and a small plate of biscuits on the coffee table. Will slowly separated them, leading her to the couch and sitting her down. He stayed standing, filling up a cup from the teapot for himself just to have something to do with his hands. There was cocoa for Abigail.

Abigail shook her head, "No, I didn't, I thought no-one else would ever have to know. I thought I could keep away from it long enough that it would be like..."

Will winced. He knew what she had wanted to say.

"And Jack," Will asked, trying to subdue the anxiousness in his tone, "what did he think when you saw Boyle's body?"

"I don't know," Abigail said, looking a little lost, "he kept staring at me, but Alana was there and she kept telling me over and over that it would be ok. I just had to ID him and it would be ok," her eyes welled up and she wiped at them fitfully, "I didn't want to ever look at him again."

"Then why did you dig him up?" Will asked purposefully, unable to keep his voice from becoming stern.

"I kept seeing him," she said, her voice breathy, scared, "I thought I was going crazy. I saw him in nightmares at first, then in the bathroom mirror. Every crowd had his face in it. I thought I'd go mad if I held onto it any longer. I thought he was haunting me. I didn't want to ever look at him again. So I knew I needed to bring him back, get him out of my head."

"We told you that we would be here to help you with the nightmares," Hannibal said as he joined them; Will couldn't help but feel like telling him to leave it alone. Still the stigma of his lies stung at Will's belief in him. He shook his head and looked at Abigail; when he took in her weary, ghostly face he was reminded why Hannibal had done it. Lecter continued, handing Abigail her mug, "we are also here to help you with the waking ones."

Hannibal stood by him, his hands clasped, while Will stood with his tea and Abigail sipped her cocoa before adding sugar from the bowl. 'We are her fathers now'. *Will took a deep breath and closed his eyes.*

Only seven minutes into entering the department, putting his jacket and bag in his locker and heading to his desk, Will was intercepted. He saw Crawford across the busy office floor, lifting up an arm and crooking his finger. Will nodded, diverting his path even though this was the last conversation he wanted to have. He already knew what it would be about before he stepped into the office and closed the door. He had sensed a few eyes following him as he did so.

"Alright," Jack said in a tone that spoke volumes about how little time he had to deal with this sort of crap, "what have you done to kick the hornet's nest this time?"

Will sighed, sitting down in the chair before Jack's desk and drumming his fingers on the arms.

"Freddie?" He asked

"You don't win any prizes for guessing," Jack said, "have you read it?"

"No."

“Maybe you should,” Jack said even though he was beginning to sound more hesitant than angry, making Will concerned, “even I don’t know how she managed this one, and it’s my job to know everything. Just...I think you should look at it, before you hear about it second hand.”

Will bit the inside of his lip and fidgeted. He didn’t want to know just as much as he did want to know what Lounds had dredged up on him. Crawford was pulling it up on his tablet, swiping his finger across the screen.

“She did a swell job of scouring you out, Will,” Jack said as he handed him the device, “and I’d like to know what you said to her to make her go this far.”

The cheap, ragged white font over the dramatic blood red spelled out Freddie Lounds' meal ticket: *Tattlecrime.com*. Will snorted at it and used his index finger to scroll down. The first few words of the headline were stock and didn’t surprise. What followed after, however, made Will’s face sink with disbelief and his heart begin to hammer in his chest.

TATTLECRIME EXPERT EXPOSE:
WILL GRAHAM UNCENSORED AND UNCUT – A BROKEN HOME FOR A BROKEN MIND

To my loyal readers, the name of William (Will) Graham will not be unfamiliar. Known to many as the man behind the apprehension of Elliot Budish, the infamous Angel Maker, the gunning down of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, the Minnesota Shrike, and the as far unsuccessful hunt for the Chesapeake Ripper, little is known about this secretive individual. I delve into his story to try and unmask the man behind the wannabe-FBI agent.

I caught up with a previous employer, Chief Henry DeVries, to ask about his time at the New Orleans Police Department. “Always holding things back so as to make himself look good” he told this reporter, “liked to be smarter than everyone else in the room but it didn't make him many friends”. A friend from the FBI academy in Quantico gave a similar statement, “Always at the top of the class but I never saw him study. I think he cheated his way up.”

Yet this condemnation of Graham’s character did not fully explain his sullen and aggressive nature. I looked further back into Graham’s past, hoping for some clues behind his sociopathic behaviour.

After extensive research it can be confirmed that Graham stemmed from a one parent home after his mother abandoned him as a child. Poor Will was forced from town to town following his father, a boat yard worker by trade, never allowing him a stable home. His father, Russell James Graham, was an alcoholic with three DUIs on his licence. A frequent substance abuser, it can only be surmised that Will was a victim of physical and emotional abuse as a child.

A home missing a nurturing mother and filled by an abusive father would surely have fostered a bitter personality, removed from society, and even a mind capable of

following murderers and psychopaths with the precision Graham shows us all. I managed to track down Will's errant mother to ask her about her decision to...

His eyes jumped. A picture of a woman in her mid fifties. Greying hair, once dark brown, a small nose and angular jaw. Clear grey eyes and a deep cupids bow that matched his own. *Dana Gillman, 56*, it read beneath her portrait with Freddie, sitting with a wide smile next to her. His father had pictures, few that he hadn't torn up. One of his dad and a woman with their arms around each other's shoulders, wearing bathing suits in the sunshine, her face covered only by large black sunglasses and a smile. On the back, he remembered in faded biro, *Me and Dana, Ballhop Bay.* Dad had always said it was a girlfriend he'd had once but it didn't last long.

Will did not finish it. The tablet was slowly returned and Jack looked at him warily. His teeth ground against each other as he tried to contain the idea of seeing his mother's picture. He opened his mouth slowly and words came out in a tight, strict procession.

"My father was not a drunk," he said, "nor did he beat me."

"I didn't think any of this was true Will," Jack said, giving him a look.

"Just want to know the record is straight," Will said.

"The content isn't what bothers me," Jack said, "I just thought you should know in case you get any questions from elsewhere. I just want to know exactly how this happened."

"She ambushed me in the parking lot," he admitted, "trying to ask about Boyle."

"To which you told her nothing, I take it."

"Not a thing," Will said tightly, "she tried to fish about Abigail, I lost it."

"Right," Jack shook his head with silent anger, "nothing about cases?"

"No," Will said, scratching his neck, "maybe I got personal. She...alright I got personal. Looks like she's returned the favour."

"You can say that again," Jack said, "look, I don't want you near Lounds, alright? This is some nasty stuff she has in here and I'll make sure she takes it down. Faced with a libel suit she'll back off damn quick, I'm sure. Until then, I want you where I can see you."

"Think I'd make this even more personal, Jack?" Will said with an acid smile.

"I think that if she wrote this sort of shit about me, I know what I'd want to do to her," Jack said significantly, "so we end this here, she gets the wrap on her knuckles and we send her on her way. Alright?"

No it's not fucking *alright*! he wanted to shout. Instead he bit the inside of his lip until it bled, smiling all the while.

"Sure Jack," he said, "sure."

He was only on a half day. Lecture at eleven during which Will stood and spoke and wondered how many of the faces looking back at him had *Tattlecrime* open on their laptops. How many had read the story and believed it, or even only just believed it; just read it and now had it in the back of their minds every time they looked at him. It was half two when he finally got a moment to himself to decide how he was going to handle this. He picked up the phone and automatically skipped through to Hannibal's number. Will let out a sound of frustration, backing up to the contacts page. Lecter was only another problem, another catch in his throat, another thing he didn't know how to deal with. He impulse selected another name and dialled, hoping she would be free this early.

"Alana Bloom," her voice was strict, professional; she hadn't looked at caller ID.

"Hey," Will said, "how are things?"

"Will," a smile in her voice, "hey yourself. You're calling early."

"On a half today," he said, itching to get his mouth around a bottle of something hard, "just wondered if you were free tonight."

"I," a quick sound of shifting paper as she probably checked her diary, "am, surprisingly. What did you have in mind?"

"Italian," Will said.

"You read my mind," she laughed, "eight?"

"Eight," Will agreed.

Démarreur

Chapter Notes

Chapter title translation - "Starter"

Warning for the very end of the chapter: scenes of a sexual nature - not very explicit but thought I'd better say as I am not yet putting up the rating of the story.

Will arrived first, running from his car to the restaurant door through the heavy rain. He was led to the small table for two by a short waiter in a white shirt, his piggy eyes quick and scattered over the other patrons. The restaurant was small but cosy, which Will could thank Alana for not exaggerating, with dark wood tables sporting wonky candles in wax stained jars. He ordered a Jack, straight up, and had finished another by the time Alana appeared at the door, shaking off her umbrella.

“Picked a good night for it,” she joked as she was seated, the same waiter pulling out her chair when Will didn’t stand to do it himself; he asked her what she would like to drink and, after she turned to Will and clocked his bourbon, Alana asked for the wine list, “and some water, please.

“Sorry I’m late,” she opened the menu, scanning surely familiar pages from which she already knew what she wanted; Will took another drink and tried his best not to analyse her behaviour, “thought I would get away early and then Sandhoffer calls, kept me till six thirty looking through his damn profiles.”

“You should practice being less accommodating,” Will said, noting that his voice was a little loose.

He had read the Clozapine fact sheet, crumpled from weeks in and out of different pockets in his bag: strictly no alcohol to be taken while on dose. He had sat in his office, shaking the pill bottle in time with the clock ticking. Eventually he had considered throwing the damn things in the trash; thankfully the not-irrationally angry part of his brain reasoned that skipping a day would be preferable. Will had agreed to that and ignored his watch when the alarm went off. A day of disillusionment would be more desirable than being completely compos mentis while he dealt with it.

“Yes, well,” Alana said, smiling quickly, “sometimes I’m just too nice, I guess.”

“Ah, you’re always nice,” Will shrugged, sitting back and closing his menu. He knew what he wanted and, unfortunately, it was *a la carte*. He was sure he would be disappointed with whatever was brought. Hannibal’s cooking had spoiled him.

Another spanner in the works came in Alana, through Will's own neuroses. Will knew that he had been desperate at two o'clock to get out of the confining grey offices in Quantico and see someone he knew who *didn't* know about the article. Now, after an hour and fifteen ride home to check on the dogs, his hands glued to the wheel, and then another hour in traffic back to Baltimore, Will had been given time to stew in his own juices; they were bitter, aspic-like, and he felt saturated. Freddie's smiling face stared at him from the corner of his mind he had shoved his feelings haphazardly into. Somehow he was able to pass it off as being tired from the day's travelling. Alana didn't know about Freddie's article yet. He was sure that tomorrow, once she found out, she would know why he'd been wound so tightly.

As such, right now in her ignorance, she was still cautious with him, no matter how she tried to cover it. Will began to wonder if she'd said yes to dinner because of the badly contained trauma hidden beneath the forced casualness in his voice over the phone. Then he began to wonder why she didn't ask about it.

Somehow dinner conversation stayed light. Alana talked about work and Will listened, interjecting here and there when appropriate. He hadn't started a single thread of the conversation simply because, if he did, he knew it would seep out black as tar. The alcohol in his system had loosened his limbs until he felt a pleasant haze. He took a glass of red wine when Alana offered.

"God, I'm sorry," Alana said with a soft smile as she sat back in her chair, wine glass in hand, "I feel like I've just been talking your ear off the whole night," Will was saved from having to reply as the waiter returned, demure smile in place, "Oh, did you want desert?"

"No," Will shook his head as the waiter stood by the table with two small menus.

"Yeah, me neither, I'm stuffed," she smiled at the waiter, "thanks."

The silence that followed was telling. Will was good at reading silences, which could be one of the reasons he hated social situations. Silences gave away everything, like a pickpocket raking through the goods. This one was terse even though she tried to hide it. Alana's folded arms allowed her fingers to grip her skin a little too tightly, her smile strained now that they were once more alone, her stance apparently relaxed yet she wasn't fully leaning against the back of her chair and her legs were crossed; he could feel her foot bumping the table leg every time she moved.

"Will," she said warningly.

"What?" he looked up, realising he'd been staring at her fingers, frowning.

"Stop analysing me," she said, leaning forwards and, as far as he was concerned, purposefully unwinding herself from the tight knot she had been in; she watched him, "you know, I thought if I talked about boring work you would be forced to give up whatever is eating you alive over there."

"Well, you don't know me as well as I thought then," Will said, lifting his glass only to realise that it was empty. Alcohol had seemed like a good idea only now it was making his tongue loose, too much for polite conversation.

“Oh, I get it. Did you invite me out here just to use me as a civil evening because you feel like trash?” Alana asked bluntly, her mouth a thin line.

“Yes,” Will replied, deciding truthfulness was best when he was trying to deceive, “and no.”

“Going to tell me why?” she seemed to take offence even with the addendum.

“Look, Alana, I really just wanted...” the last thing he’d wanted was this but it seemed too late for that now.

“Is it work?” she asked shortly.

“No, look...”

“Abigail?”

“No.”

“Something wrong with the dogs?”

“No,” even thought that was strictly a lie.

“Hannibal?” she seemed to be clutching at straws, lifting her hands in defeat.

“*No*,” Will knew she’d picked up on his intonation immediately, before he could correct it.

She’d missed the mark he’d been protecting and hit another. Will felt anxiety creeping up his neck, rubbing at the itching feeling. There were some things that Alana could never know and his troubles with Hannibal were top of the list. In fact, he thought, there wasn’t anyone he knew who could know about his troubles with Hannibal. She was watching him with curiosity bubbling beneath her closed lips.

“Ok,” Will said, avoiding Alana’s eyes and deciding that coming clean about the real reason in Freddie was more appropriate than coming clean about the *real* reason in Lecter, “so I might have had ulterior motives in asking you to dinner.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know,” Alana smiled in order to keep her own curiosity covered.

“Not like that,” Will gave her a look; it came as a delayed surprise that his attraction hadn’t been the main factor in taking Alana up on her offer, “it’s just been a tough day, that’s all. Freddie’s been on the hunt and I guess she must have smelled the blood on me.”

Sitting back in her chair Alana looked a little deflated. Mention of Freddie always served to make her more compassionate, which is why Will had avoided it in the first place. As if in sympathy a woman at the next table began to cry discretely, looking around in embarrassment. The sight made him cramp up more than it normally would have. He looked at his empty wine glass and wondered if this had been a mistake. Will looked away just as her friend began to comfort her, finding Alana’s eyes fixed on him.

“You want to talk about it?” she asked.

“Not really,” he shook his head, “I’d rather listen to you talk about work.”

“*Hey*.”

“I mean it,” Will shrugged, “it’s not as boring as you make it out to be.”

“And I’m pretty sure whatever Lounds has written isn’t boring either.”

“Not boring,” Will said tightly, “just dull. All browns and greys. Kind of like Freddie.”

“I don’t know,” Alana said, raising her eyebrows even as her mouth quirked in dislike, “I always thought she was kind of a colourful character.”

“Not on the inside,” Will retorted; he reigned his terse tone back in.

“She really got to you this time, huh,” Alana said, letting out a sigh, “was it..?”

“Look, can we drop this?” he interrupted, feeling uncomfortable.

“You started it,” her smile was definitely amused at his expense.

“You asked me not to analyse you, now I’m asking you not to psychoanalyse me,” Will said, smiling grimly in return, “believe me, you wouldn’t like me when I’m psychoanalysed.”

“If it’s anything worse than when you’re not then, yeah, I’m sure I wouldn’t,” she said wryly.

She wasn’t wrong and that, in itself, only lent itself to Will’s skewed perception. I’ve become so adept at hiding from myself that I can’t even focus on the right problem, Will thought. Freddie had been staring out from the corner of his mind but, if he looked closer, she was just a piece of scrap atop of the pile. Behind everything else he’d picked up and thrown on was a demure smile and calculating eyes; a sharp cut suit and long fingers. Truthfully he wasn’t even sure how Hannibal had managed to pervade so deeply. Every metaphorical corner he turned there was a thread leading back to him, red trails criss-crossing in intricate patterns. He’d opened his mind to the man and Hannibal had taken what he wanted without a second thought. Or Will had given it to him with a similar disregard for its value. What had Lecter called it? Will remembered. *The bone arena of his skull*; now, when he looked, Hannibal was the face of every spectator, each with subtle but varying expressions. Will knew why he was bitter about the whole affair and now, looking back on it, realised that the bitterness had somehow overcome the outrage and betrayal at Hannibal’s flaunting of the law.

“If you wanted to know,” Will said as Alana gestured for the cheque, “why didn’t you just ask before?”

“Because I was worried that if I asked you would tell me,” she said with the obvious intent of humour, “and so far we’d been having a nice night.”

Ouch, Will thought. He knew he deserved it but he didn’t want to deal with the underlying truth in her words.

Taking one look at the bill when it turned up Will realised why he didn't eat out. He fished in his wallet and had just enough to cover half with a moderate tip thrown in. Luck more than judgement, he thought, which could sum up this whole evening. He felt his phone vibrating in his coat pocket, humming where it touched the chair, and excused himself before Alana could start up her inquiry again. He didn't even look at the ID, so grateful was he for a distraction.

"Graham," he said on auto-pilot.

"Will, good," Jack's voice, "sorry for the late call, but I need you out here."

"Need me out where?" Will asked before he could fully process the fact that this was out of the ordinary, "Wait, it's nine forty at night. Where am I going?"

It had taken longer than usual to get to the crime scene, mainly because Will had told Jack he couldn't drive as he'd been drinking. A car had been sent for him from the local Baltimore office and he'd been driven out to Greenwood in Delaware, after saying his apologies to Alana. He felt a little light headed and knew he shouldn't have underplayed just how much he'd had. Jack had sounded damn urgent and there was no room for budging him; had to be now, had to be quick. Will hadn't wanted to disappoint.

The pill bottle in his pocket burned in his mind like an omen. He thought he felt his mind flickering along with the passing streetlights on the motorway but couldn't tell if it was just his imagination or not. Chesapeake Bay offered a dark, rippled mirror in the heavy rain across which the lit bridge wound like an electric leviathan. He kept his eyes outside the car and the agent in the driver's seat stayed blessedly quiet. There was a familiar itch of pain building at the base of his skull. Will rubbed at the nape of his neck and tried to ignore it as they passed by Stevensville and up through Chester. The countryside swallowed them and everything began to draw dark silhouettes against darker skies. Soon it was nothing but the headlights illuminating the underside of the trees as they drove slowly up a long driveway, gnarled branches leaping out for a soft touch of the car's roof as the rain dripped through.

"You picked a great day to get a social life," Jack said by way of greeting, standing under his umbrella as the rain continued to fall.

"Tell me again why this couldn't wait until morning?" Will returned; he could tell Jack wasn't pleased and had to decisively curb the attitude that the drink was coaxing out. He rubbed at his right temple and blinked.

"This one's a rare find," Jack said as he walked Will up to what appeared to be a large farmhouse; Will clocked the unknown car near the porch stairs, assumedly the victims, "and when we arrived the scene was being compromised by the local PD and the weather. The window was open and the rain could have washed away evidence left on the body. This is about to become bogged down in red tape and I don't want to waste another minute where we could lose anything."

"Wait," Will said as they rushed to the porch, "local PD? How did they get a handle on this so fast?"

“Oh, that’s the bit you’re going to love,” Jack said, putting down his umbrella and shaking it, “the perp called it in.”

“You’re sure?” Will asked; too good to be true, surely.

The house opened up into a well lit living room with all the usual conveniences.The victim liked horses, Will thought as he greeted the familiar face of Beverly Katz taking photographs for the reconstruction. There were photographs galloping, paintings trotting, ornaments rearing up majestically. The decor was old fashioned, lots of browns and creams, floral patterns. Not the victims choice of house then, maybe a parent’s gift in a will?

Jack continued with the victim’s name, Beth LeBeau, occupation, whereabouts before the time of death, etc. Will continued to form a picture of her in his mind around the base structure of the facts as he was fed them. The vehicle out front had been large enough to haul a trailer. The victim more than likely owned horses, Will continued as Jack led him up a narrow set of stairs, they would have been strong, fit, but Will sensed complacency here. No burglar alarm, no second lock on the door. No sign of forced entry. To turn on the ground floor lights someone would have to descend the stairs in the pitch dark and walk the length of the room.

“This doesn’t exactly go with dinner,” Jack warned as they navigated the narrow corridor on the first floor, around a few techs carving blood samples from the wooden floor with neat scalpels.

“I’m sure I’ve seen worse,” Will mumbled, even though he was unsure if that would prove true. Jack’s look said it all, as did the fluid motion of those in the corridor as they stepped back against the wall, creating a causeway for him to walk above the chaos. The walk in was made alone and the door shut after him.

The room was cold, even with the window shut. Wet wood shone in the intermittent moonlight, shining on and off as the clouds swarmed overhead, stretching up onto pale ankles and damp pyjama bottoms. Will walked into the room as a magpie, trying to take the shining pieces from the scene before him. It was not a tasty meal, Jack hadn’t lied about that. It was dark and sinister in the closed off room, the slanting roof taking away any sense of space. He stared at the bed for a few minutes to stabilise himself before he looked to the face of Beth LeBeau, or what was left of it. A Cheshire cat’s smile grinned back at him, the glistening jewels of missing teeth and cheeks carelessly displayed. The grin did not match her eyes which stared wide at the ceiling in a mockery of surprise.

The air was perfumed with the steady stench of blood and the creeping under-smell of urine and faeces. Will stalled his hand as it was brought to his mouth instinctually to protect it. The itch in his head was starting to throb and Will knew it was going to continue until he couldn’t see from the pain; he recognised the start of a migraine better than most symptoms. His fingers twitched as he kept them by his chin. You need this, he told himself, don’t stay apart from it. Fingers curled into a fist. It was brought down to his side. Will stood at the foot of Beth LeBeau and closed his eyes.

One swing. *I’ve come home from a long day, Jack said I’d been at work. A veterinarian in Ridgely, working with large animals. Afterwards I’d volunteered at the Changing Fates*

equine rescue, half an hour away in Laurel. It had been dark by the time I returned home. So I parked a little closer to the house than normal [the normal parking space had been worn thin by constant tyres, lesser tyre tracks led to the vehicle downstairs]. *Didn't like the walk up the drive in the dark. It spooked me.*

Two swings. *Inside it was a quick routine. Bags down in the living room, sorted tomorrow. Short shower but not my hair, that would take too long to dry. Get changed, brush teeth, bunker down for the night. Extra duvet to cover from the cold. Eyes closed.*

Three swings. *A noise. There was a noise from downstairs* [she had her dressing gown on, she'd been up to check something]. *I go down with a flashlight because I hate that the damn switch is so far away* [he finds the flashlight under the bed where it must have rolled from a limp hand]. *Meant to have the wiring changed but so damn expensive to get someone out here. Old walls, old house, old electrics. Do I find something? No. There would be nothing there, but I'm spooked. I want to go back to bed and close the door. I shut off the downstairs light and hurry up the stairs and...*

Four swings. *I stop here. Why do I stop here? The window, the window is open and the rain is getting in. Do I try the lights and they don't work?* [he tries the lights, they don't come on. Something tripped out because of the storm or is it intentional?] *They don't work. Now I feel scared. The flashlight is dull* [he clicks it on and looks around the room] *needs new batteries. It's a three quarter moon out but the rain clouds keep closing it off, leaving the room even darker. I hurry in but I don't close the window, I don't take my dressing gown off and I don't get into bed. There's something else, something I check, somewhere I can't see without...under the bed.*

The fifth swing. *I'm not sure if this is really a place to be, a safe place. I'm hiding because I know it is safe but I feel scared* [Why am I scared? Why am I scared?] *there is a way in that I know. I've been here before, I know this place. I get in through the window after trying the door downstairs and finding it locked. I crawl under the bed because it is safe and confining. I need confining, I need to be inside, I need this. Footsteps. Someone is coming for me. Do I attack because I am scared* [I need to know something, what do I need to know?] *or because I want to kill? No, no there is no want to kill, this is different. I cut quickly because she screams and the sound is loud, abrasive, frightening. I do not see her as a person, not as a real person, can't find the safe place because it's all confusing and no matter how much I cut I feel she can't tell me now, not now, what I needed to ask.*

Walk downstairs in the dark and it feels safer, only a little, away from the other one. I pick up the phone as I remember doing before [why do I call?] *I know the number she said to call if I got scared, she said to call if I needed help, long ago I remember her words and I speak to the woman on the other end as she says...*

Eyes open. Will blinked and felt the familiar and disturbing sense of displacement as he found himself in the living room standing above an old fashioned bakelite phone covered in bloody smears with a neat, yellow tag next to it designating it as *fifteen*. He looked around slowly to find Jack standing a respectful five feet behind him, watching cautiously. Fuck, he thought savagely, *fuck*. I thought...Will blinked once more and cleared his throat, unwilling to give away that he had no knowledge of coming down the stairs at all. His heart was beating

double time and the throbbing in his head was only worsening. He needed more information, there were gaps in her thinking, difficult to grasp.

“She called the police?” Will asked.

“Yes, at...” Jack opened a small notebook he pulled from his pocket, “six fifteen. We have the recording, do you want to hear it?”

“Yeah,” Will nodded; he had a suspicion he needed confirmed.

A young agent Will half recognised from Jack’s pool of rookies had the message on a small digital recorder with headphones attached.

“Hi Mr.Graham,” the young man said, to which Will gave him a startled, awkward half smile on reflex; the name Unger sprang to mind with the youthful face. Jack gave the rookie a heavy stare into submission as Will took the recorder, sufficiently pulled back into the present by the man’s words. Will guessed Jack had trouble getting hold of everyone he wanted at this time of night, so must have been forced to call in help from those ever eager to prove themselves.

The earphones blocked out the bustle, creating a box-like feeling around him as he moved backwards in time and heard the voice of a person inside whose thoughts he’d tried to delve.

“Greenwood 911, what is the location of your emergency?”
“Can you hear me?”
“Yes, maam, I can hear you. Can you tell me the nature of your emergency?”
“I don’t know if she saw me. Can you see me?”
“I’m sorry maam, this line is for emergencies only. If you do not have an emergency I’ll have to ask you to hang up and...”
“She can’t hang up. I tried to take it off. Can you hear me if I’m dead?”

Will drew in a deep breath as the sound of the answering officer’s voice was cut off when the receiver was replaced. He pulled the earphones out and the sound of the room rushed back in. He had been right, just not in the way he expected. Jack was watching him closely and Will felt the need to hunch his shoulders up around his neck. He handed the recorder and headphones back to Unger.

“She said ‘I tried to take it off’,” Will said to Jack’s curious gaze, “what was she talking about?”

“Let’s get everyone back upstairs,” Jack said, gesturing to Beverly; he turned back to Will, “we haven't been in yet, I kept it closed until you got here, didn’t want anything moved.”

He hadn’t particularly wanted to but he ascended once more, back to the body. Emergency lights were set up on a generator, flooding the room with warm white. They all tramped inside carefully which allowed Will to realise Zeller, dark eyed and grumpy looking, had also been called in. He was soaked, hair wet, and Will surmised he’d been on the outside crew. He gave Will a cursory nod which was returned. There was a short interlude while Katz and Zeller looked over the scene, photographing and bagging. Will waited for the talk to start.

“She drowned on her own blood,” Zeller suppressed a yawn before continuing, “what she didn’t drown on is all over the floor and under the bed. She must have been trying to hide.”

“No,” Will said, quickly qualifying his rebuttal, “she was dragged there. Her attacker was under the bed.”

“She fought to claw her way out,” Beverly said, picking up something from inside the heavy streaks of blood; a fingernail was dropped into a plastic vial, dated and coded and put into a heavy duty evidence bag.

Taking another moment to look around the scene with his own eyes Will noticed the pictures strewn across the small cupboard on the left opposite the bed. Cracked and broken frames, shattered glass and, in each, a face scored out, scratched from existence. Will put on a pair of gloves Zeller handed him and picked one up carefully. He heard another enter the room and turned to find Price, fresh faced and wearing a flat cap, walking in.

“Oh, hi Will,” he said, sounding chipper as ever, “staring without me?”

“Hello,” Will said for lack of a better greeting, feeling it inappropriate to do so, “um, did we get any prints from the phone?”

“Nope, not a single one,” Price said as he began examining the room with his beady eyes, “something wrong with the skin, I think it might be damaged or even diseased. Didn’t leave anything on the phone, door knobs, window handles, not a thing. I’ll see if there’s anything in here but I wouldn’t hold your breath.”

“So,” Jack said as he took the picture from Will, “someone resented her. Ex-boyfriend? Co-worker?”

“It’s weird,” Zeller suddenly said as if to himself; when he realised everyone was looking at him he cleared his throat and continued, “these cuts are deliberate but maybe not in the way they seem. The smile is just an after effect, a consequence. I think she was trying to pull the skin back, look here you can see the nail marks next to the clean knife cut.”

“I tried to take it off,” Will repeated to himself under his breath, “that’s what she said. It’s like...” his eyes swivelled to the desecrated pictures then back to the corpse, “like she didn’t want to see her face. Or maybe wanted to see what was underneath. As if it was a mask she was trying to remove. But then why would she make the call? She sounded like she needed confirmation,” he turned to Jack again, “I thought she might have been scared, she was hiding under the bed when she surprised Beth, but kept asking the officer on the phone if she could hear her, see her. It sounded like she thought she was already dead.”

“Sounds delusional,” Beverly spoke up.

“I agree,” Will said, sniffing and rubbing at his temple with quick knuckles, “her actions speak of comfort more than mal intent. She wanted confirmation but something got in the way. She asked the officer if she could hear her if she was dead, that could be part of her delusion. No signs in the surrounding area?”

“No tyre tracks, not even horse hooves,” Jack said contentiously, “honestly don’t even know how she got out so far without transport.”

“She knew her way here, she knew her way in,” Will said, “and there aren’t any of the usual signs of a struggle on Beth’s body. I think she knew her attacker.”

“Well it’s too damn dark and wet for the dogs but she can’t have gone too far without help,” Jack said, “if she is caught in a delusion this strong, like you say, she should stand out in a crowd.”

Not necessarily, Will thought, feeling a sharp stab of conscience.

The migraine came as he knew it would. Will hadn’t wanted to take the Clozapine with the alcohol still in his system, even though it would have been mainly gone by the time he got home. The pain built and built like a glowing fire in his skull until he ended up a ball on the floor with his head between his knees, desperately checking the blue digital readout of the clock every few minutes to see when he could next swallow the max dose of Advil. The last thing he remembered seeing was the blue readout flashing over into four thirty three and then...

Cold, dark, the smell of blood and Will knew everything was switching terrifyingly back. He felt his knees shake as he reached out to touch the half closed doorway of Beth LeBeau’s bedroom and found the wood was real under his fingertips. *Jesus*, he thought, steadying his breathing as it threatened to become erratic, this isn’t supposed to be happening. I’m here, I know who I am, I know I’m not sick anymore! He tried to check his watch but it wasn’t on his wrist. Nightstand, Will thought quickly, I left it on the nightstand. He realised the house wasn’t completely dark and looked down to see a flashlight in his right hand. Will swallowed and looked into the room.

Rational, he thought painfully, be rational. What did Lecter call it? His wandering feet. They took him places for a reason, didn’t they? Hannibal had told him they brought Will to him because he needed help. If that was true, then why had they brought him here? He looked down at the floor, the pool of light illuminating the dark red blood, scraping outwards towards the bed. Will moved the flashlight to the right as his mind still jumped around like an angry cricket, trying not to fall hateful of his rash decision to stop taking his meds so suddenly, to believe he was cured because his symptoms had been lessening, to believe there had been no need in the first place to...

The face stared at him and Will stared back. A jaundiced nightmare visage with claw-like hands that made Will fear his own reality. Suddenly it scuttled back like a spider exposed. Will felt his heart hammering in his throat. Real or not? Real *or not*? He bent down slowly and peered under the bed with the flashlight, knowing that he was following the steps he had felt as Beth LeBeau moments before her murder. He kept his hand steady but couldn’t stop the sharp intake of breath as the bed upturned like a trap springing, jerking him to his feet as the nightmare rushed past him. He reached out to grab at the transient shape but his hand met cold skin, sloughing away under his tight grip like a snake shedding. He stood, huffing out

breaths of hot air into the freezing room, trembling as he stared at the hanging flesh in his hand, limp like a Halloween prop. He stumbled out of the room after the fleeing shape of a woman in a white dress that he swore he had seen, he swore was real.

The rain had stopped but the layer of heavy wetness had frozen through the night as ice atop the snow, making it slippery and hard to walk through. He struggled after the sound of crunching ice while his chest heaved and his mind raced.

"Wait!" he called out futilely, "*Wait*, please, I'm not here to hurt you!"

No reply but the echoing sound of crushed snow and breaking underbrush. Will tripped and lost the flashlight from cold, numbed fingers. The sudden darkness terrified him. He stood in a scramble of limbs and icy shards, rushing after the soft glow of the bulb. He picked it up and looked around him. The sounds had grown quiet even as he listened intently. Standing up he realised his ankle hurt and he grimaced at the pain.

"Hello?" he shouted for lack of anything more appropriate, "Can you hear me?"

The forest was silent around him. He turned as the connections in his mind rampaged like bulls, crashing headlong into each other as he tried to understand. *Can you hear me? Can you see me?* It clicked together with a mangling of limbs and a snorting of an animal, hooves rushing and rushing.

"If you can hear me," Will shouted, "I can hear you. I can see you. You're alive. You're *alive*!"

No sound. Did that mean he'd imagined it? Was she even there or had he *imagined* her? He looked down and realised that at some point he'd dropped the snake-like skin from his grasp, rapidly searching around his feet and scanning the snow. There was no trace of it. Will felt his skin tingle as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Help, he needed help. He fumbled in his pocket, feeling keys, wallet, *phone*. He thanked his unconscious self for being practical even while it had betrayed him. Will looked at the time as the phone turned on; five fifty two in the morning. He typed the number rather than scrolled through the contacts because it made it definite. If he scrolled he'd be tempted by others; Jack, Beverly, the local PD. Typing it made the choice final. Will closed his eyes and felt his feet numbing in their snow encasement as the phone rang and rang. *Please*, he pleaded silently, losing his grip on the emotions building in his chest, please pick up the *damn phone*. The ringtone ended but silence was his only greeting. Will thought that there was no chance now, no chance. Then, to his intense relief, a voice spoke, familiar in its groggy professionalism.

"...Hello?"

Will was transported back to that night in the cabin, darkness and the soothing voice, slowing his racing heart, keeping the madness at bay. He felt his knees buckle and sank through the icy sheet into the snow. The voice sounded like his own but he did not recognise it, not truly.

Please, it said, *you've got to help me*.

Will? Where are you? What's wrong? He thought he heard the voice but the phone dropped from his fingers and disappeared into the deep snow drift, illuminating the white crystals as it sank. Will felt his eyes shuttering rapidly and couldn't stay conscious. His eyes rolled in his head. As he sank down into the comforting cold he thought he could hear the voice speaking to him. *Tell me where you are*. He could not answer, even if he had wanted to.

Warm. Warm and soft. Will wriggled slightly in the softness and wondered absently why he couldn't feel his toes. Everything felt so intensely comfortable. He hadn't remembered waking up but wondered if he'd slept past his alarm. For some reason the thought didn't panic him as it normally would have. He was happy to sleep in. He deserved it, didn't he? After everything, he deserved a rest.

"*Will!*"

Had he heard that? Would he have to open his eyes if someone wanted to see him? Will wasn't sure he was ok with that. He'd rather go back to sleep. That way he could...

"Will! Can you hear me?!"

Can you hear me? Will felt his forehead crease slightly. His skin felt numb. Could he hear? Yes...yes he could hear. That meant he was alive, didn't it? Why would he think he was dead? He had been sleeping but then, then he had woken up, hadn't he? He'd woken up in the nightmare. She'd rushed past him hadn't she? Or had she? Was she even real? Was this?

"WILL!"

Forcing his eyes open was perhaps one of the most difficult things he'd ever done, mainly because it was tricky to feel the connection between his want to do so and the muscles responsible. It was reassuring at first to be faced with darkness. Then confusing as a light flashed overhead. He blinked slowly, feeling something in his hand. What is this? He tried to understand the wet feeling on his body. Why am I wearing my jacket to bed? He thought as he managed to rotate his right hand and looked down with his eyes alone, realising he was holding a flashlight. It clicked on with a subtle sound, spraying light upwards onto what looked like tree branches. Will stared at them and wondered if the nightmare he thought was over was still running in his brain. Crunching and shushing reached his ears, like waves bringing in the frozen ice flows. He wanted to wake up. Instead he stared upwards as a tall figure walked into his small field of vision, illuminated by the flashlight, and he was plucked from the nightmare by familiar hands.

It took a good hour before he was compos mentis enough to at least understand his surroundings. By then Will knew that he had hypothermia because Hannibal had told him so. Bundled in the front seat of the Bentley, wrapped in blankets from Lecter's emergency kit in the boot and with the heater on full blast, Will had tried desperately to fall asleep but Hannibal's voice had stopped him at every turn.

"I need you to stay awake, Will," he said authoritatively, "do you understand?"

Nodding hadn't been a good enough response. He had been forced to respond verbally until they finally stopped moving. He was able to stumble inside with help, his feet at least feeling as if they were attached to him again. He was walked into a familiar room that made him realise exactly where he was. He stared at Hannibal's drawing room and frowned, looking around groggily as hands began pulling at his clothes.

"What..?" he asked as his jacket was removed.

"Your clothes are wet," Lecter explained in a blunt, professional tone that Will found easy to follow, "I am going to take them off and give you dry ones."

"Mmm hmm," Will nodded as he was stripped, offering no resistance.

Will stood, shivering in the blanket from the car, and waited for Hannibal to come back. He returned with a thick jumper and a set of thermals. Will allowed himself to be dressed because it was difficult to make his hands do what he wanted them to. The jumper was soft as it was pulled down over his head. He struggled into the arms and then sat down heavily on the couch behind him. A few moments later there was a warm cup of something in his hands and two hot water bottles bundled into his lap. A thermometer was placed in his mouth and Will blinked. A minute later it was removed and Will watched Hannibal read it with a closed expression.

"Drink," he was instructed; Will did as he was told even as his arms shook. He felt Hannibal sit down beside him and an arm reached around to pull the blanket up over his shoulders. He was held tightly, feeling an intense warmth spreading from the water bottles. He thought he could feel it trickling down his legs and arms as he sipped what turned out to be intensely sweet hot chocolate. Once he was done Lecter forced him to stand on shaky legs and walk around the room. Will tried to protest, feeling grouchy and irritable, but Hannibal was unrelenting. Next he was fed something sweet and then made to walk up and down the stairs. By the time he ended up back on the couch with the thermometer in his mouth Will felt terrible.

"Ninety seven degrees," Hannibal said, "much more respectable than eighty eight," he knelt down in front of Will and reached out to touch the skin at his neck; Hannibal's touch was certainly warmer but not scalding as it had felt before, "Do you know where you are?"

"Yes," he said, elaborating when Hannibal prompted him to say more, "your house. Drawing room."

"Good," Hannibal said, "your name?"

"Will Graham."

"Age?"

"Thirty six."

"The date?"

“Thirteenth of March,” Will replied.

“Actually it is the fourteenth now,” Hannibal corrected, “but I can take that as close enough. Your job?”

“To tell you to please stop asking me questions,” Will said irritably, “my head hurts.”

“I see you have returned to me, Will,” Hannibal said, smiling softly, “some hot peppermint tea I think. No caffeine.”

Eventually, at eight thirteen if the clock on the mantelpiece read correctly, Will had managed to escape the fuzzy cocoon that had encased his mind and walked about the drawing room on his own in the late dawn light that filtered through the curtains. He felt exhausted but simultaneously wired. His feet hurt a little as he walked but Hannibal had already checked and told him it was frost nip, not frost bite. He was forced back to the couch and made to put his feet in warm water and take some co-codamol. Anchored as he was, Hannibal began the inevitable questioning that Will, as he had regained his ability to comprehend his situation, had not been looking forward to.

“You were mumbling on the ride home, about a woman.”

“The woman,” Will said half to Lecter, half to himself, “god, I don’t know. I’m not sure she was even really there,” when he looked to Hannibal the man appeared to be waiting for more, “I...there was a murder, in Greenwood. A woman in her home, her face was cut up through the cheeks like some sort of grin, Zeller thinks the attacker might have been trying to remove the skin. Beverly thought, I mean we all think she’s suffering from some sort of delusion. I think she believes she’s dead, I...lost time. A couple of hours. I woke up at Greenwood and she was there. I saw her under the bed, like the damn bogyman, staring at me. I tried to look but she ran. Grabbed her arm and it came off in my hand, the skin, like a...like a glove.”

“Was there any blood?” Lecter asked practically.

“No, nothing, it was like prosthetic skin,” Will tried to recall the texture, “and she was jaundiced, her eyes were discoloured.”

“It sounds like a staphylococcal infection,” Hannibal suggested, “or leprosy perhaps. You say she believes she is dead?”

“She called the police, reported the murder by mistake,” Will shook his head, “she asked the officer if it was possible to be heard if you were already dead. I think she was talking about herself.”

“I see,” Lecter stood while Will held onto his tea and pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders, “if you don’t mind my on the fly diagnosis it sounds like Cotard syndrome.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Will admitted.

“It is a rare mental disorder,” Hannibal seemed to have subconsciously adopted a teaching tone, “in which the afflicted person truly believes that he or she is dead. If she is concurrently

suffering from an infection or disease that simulates her fears, this may have been a trigger for her behaviour."

"She didn't..." Will changed his defensive tone, "I don't think she meant to do this. It didn't seem like a crime of passion or of hate. She was searching for something."

"Perhaps a face?" Hannibal suggested, making Will wince, then frown, then his eyes widened.

"Faces," he thought as the bulls began to run once more; the hesitation, the scratched out pictures, the confused look she had given him from under the bed, "she *can't see faces*. That could mean, god, it could mean she didn't even know who she was killing. She might not have known she was killing someone she knew. And with the infection she might not know what she's doing *at all*."

Will bit at the inside of his lip and tried to stave off the growing exhaustion. He took another mouthful of tea and shook his head. Things were crashing over each other once more, tumbling and braying. Or are you hoping she didn't know what she was doing? Will thought, frowning, Because if she didn't know then there's hope for you too, right? He closed his eyes and tried to think straight.

"Perhaps if we go through it from the top?" Lecter suggested when Will opened his eyes once more; the thought sounded torturous but he complied.

He went through it in steps, slow and steady, and in explaining it so thoroughly Will felt it almost inconceivable that it had been less than eleven hours since he'd left Alana at the restaurant. Everything had stretched out, elongating until it had seemed days ago that he had seen her face, watching him with insulted amusement.

"How much and what," Lecter asked when Will admitted stiffly that he'd skipped his meds so he could have a drink.

"Not that much," he shrugged, knowing he was only trying to make excuses for himself, "two doubles of bourbon and a glass of red wine."

"I would tell you that I'm disappointed," Hannibal said as he refilled Will's cup with tea and made sure the water was still warm in the basin for his feet, "but I'm sure that wouldn't help."

"No need to be passive aggressive with me, doctor," Will groused irrationally, "I'm well aware it was incredibly bloody stupid."

"Hannibal, please," Lecter said bluntly.

"Right," Will sighed, "Hannibal. Sorry, I'm not feeling myself right now, I..."

"That is to be expected," Hannibal said as he once more picked up the thermometer, "please," he waited until Will opened his mouth before placing it under his tongue and waiting. When

he removed it his eyes showed satisfaction and perhaps a small glint of triumph, “ninety eight point three.”

“Back to normal?” Will asked.

“Absolutely average,” Hannibal’s eyes watched him curiously; Will fidgeted under the stare before a hand reached up to touch his hair. Will moved his head away but looked up to find a small leaf caught in Lecter's fingers. Will swallowed, watching him as the man spoke softly, “I am just wondering how many times you wish to scare me, Will Graham.”

“Scare you?” Will let out a small laugh to cover the sudden flush he could feel creeping up his neck; a sting of embarrassment he didn’t often experience.

“The night you called me at the cabin I thought you might be having a heart attack,” Lecter spoke in such a matter-of-fact tone that Will found it difficult to read him, “and tonight, well...when I found you I almost believed I was too late.”

“Guess I’m more resilient than you give me credit for,” Will smiled and swallowed down the unease, both at the mention of how close he had come to death, that didn’t seem real, not at all, and also at Hannibal’s voice; so very calm and controlled and yet, after his hesitation, an intensity rang in his words, “How, um,” Will cleared his throat and avoided Lecter’s eyes, “how did you? Find me, I mean.”

“Your phone,” Lecter explained simply, “it has GPS.”

“You tracked my phone’s GPS?” Will realised that the paranoid lilt to his tone made him sound a tad ungrateful, “I fucking never use it. How delightfully ironic.”

“It would appear so,” Lecter looked down at him and Will wasn’t sure if he appreciated the scrutiny or not; it was intense and Will didn’t know how to handle it. He looked away as Lecter continued, “do you want me to call Jack, let him know what has happened?”

“No, I’ll call him,” Will said, “but I need to get some sleep first. If I call him now he’ll be here bashing the door down and dragging me back out there. I just need a few hours, really, then I’ll call."

“If I were your doctor, and I believe I am close enough to the role,” Lecter said, “then I would recommend a full day’s bed rest after your body has suffered such intense trauma.”

“Good thing you’re not my doctor then,” Will said as he pulled his feet from the warm water and dried them on a small towel Lecter had brought earlier. Then, without delay, he lay down on the sofa and pulled the blanket over him, “you’ll wake me, right?”

Hannibal let out a terse sigh but nodded nonetheless. He insisted on making Will another hot water bottle as a precaution and then took the armchair opposite the sofa and picked up a book from the coffee table.

“You don’t have to watch me,” Will said slowly, his voice filled with sleep, barely able to keep his eyes open, “I’m alright now, really.”

“I believe I can be the judge of that,” Lecter himself looked tired but resolute.

In the comforting heat Will found he couldn’t resist him. He didn’t even remember closing his eyes.

The library was almost perfectly reconstructed, rows upon rows of books, the immaculate desk, the antiques upon their podiums which Will had always found slightly pretentious. Yet the scale was vastly out of proportion. The ceiling vaulted away from him, cathedral-like, and the walls seemed miles away even though he could walk to them in no time at all. Will did so as he looked for a specific book: The Book of Practical Fishing Knots. He opened to page twenty six, the Crawford knot. A speedy knot, quick and efficient, yet it tied too tight around his fingers. Tangled his life into an indecipherable mess of wire. Will frowned, flicking forwards. He heard footsteps echoing behind him, roaming around as he read.

“Fishing makes you feel young, does it Will?”

“Yes,” Will replied easily, recognising Hannibal’s voice, “I suppose it does. Innocent.”

Page seventy eight, the surgeon’s knot. Strong, fast and reliable. Two wires tied in perfect unison, a flexible knot that would resist snarls. Will smiled at it, using his right hand to simulate tying it. He felt as if he were conducting an orchestra.

“Who took it from you,” Hannibal asked, closer now, “that you would have to look for it?”

“You know who,” Will said, snapping the book shut; he frowned, realising he had lost his page, “Hobbs stole it from me the moment I pulled the trigger.”

“You felt innocent before?”

“More so than now,” Will defended; there was no heat behind his words. He flicked a few pages of the book but now all the pages were empty, “everything’s relative, isn’t it?”

“Yes, of course.”

He turned to feel the ladder against his back and Hannibal against his front. The feeling was deeply comforting as the man held him, strong arms wrapped around his shoulders, Will’s own head fitting perfectly into the crook of the man’s neck. He sighed, dropping the book. It wasn’t necessary, not really. He knew the knots by heart.

“You don’t need to watch over me,” Will said as he felt the hands on his back wander over his skin.

“Yet I do it nonetheless,” Hannibal answered, yet it seemed out of place, as if spoken at another time and transplanted; Will tried to lean back but couldn’t move, secured to the ladder as if tied to it.

“Why don’t you let me go?” he asked angrily, “You can’t keep me here.”

“I am not keeping you, Will,” Hannibal’s smile was revealed as he leaned back, eyes distinctly hungry. Will realised that he was right, looking down to find there were no knots holding him in place, nothing anchoring him to the ladder, nothing stopping him from running, “you stay of your own desire.”

It was a truth he could understand. Hannibal leaned down to kiss him as if it were perfectly normal. Will accepted it as a natural progression. It was soft at first, then demanding, hands groping at his flesh. Everything melded into one and Will felt as if his skin was tingling with static electricity. He let out a soft sound as his mouth was released, a soft chorus of choral voices rising up from the far end of the room as spectres from a burial mound. Lecter’s attentions descended his body, manipulating him keenly. He looked up, allowing his eyes to alight upon the statue of the stag, half raised on its hind legs, black as pitch. It seemed to watch him as his world narrowed down to pure sensation. Will closed his eyes and let out a harsh sigh before he looked down slowly. Hannibal smiled, on his knees before him. Black antlers jutting from his perfectly parted hair, his eyes smiling with his lips.

“Do you trust me, Will?”

He opened his mouth and screamed. In fear or ecstasy, Will would never know. He started awake, the sunlight in his face and his cock unbearably hard. He struggled beneath the blanket feebly, looking to his left to find Hannibal still in his chair, asleep, eyes closed, face slack, without his rigid control, mouth slightly open, hair out of place, book haphazard across his chest, long fingers draped over bent pages...

Will came with a hand over his mouth in case he made a sound he might regret. He stared at his best friend as he shuddered from the sensation, remembering the remnants of his dream as if it were mocking him from his subconscious. He lowered his hand slowly, feeling it hot and wet from his panted breath. He closed his eyes and then opened them again. Everything remained the same. He felt a creeping sense of shame and panic licking up his spine.

Through everything he had preying on his mind, killers and Alana and his sanity and Jack and his dogs and what people thought of him, if they trusted him, thought he was mad, crazy, insane...Hannibal had become his rock. The reliable knot to tie him to his reality. This, he thought as he stared at the man and knew his dream spoke the volumes he hadn’t been willing to recognise, *the deliberate touches whenever Lecter had the chance to touch him, the knowing comments, the genuine concern for his well being that he did not show for any other except Abigail, the soft smile he offered to no one else, the hunger in the man’s eyes that Will hadn’t been able to explain*, this did not help in the slightest. His own reaction to the dream, as far as he was concerned, only compounded the issue.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he whispered to himself as he clamped his hand over his eyes.

La Parade Nuptiale du Chien Errant (première partie)

Chapter Notes

Title translation:

La Parade Nuptiale du Chien Errant (première partie) - "The Courting of the Stray (part one)"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The barking woke him. Heart in his throat he fought the covers and quickly retrieved the flashlight from the bedside cabinet. He had a feeling that the lights might not work. Mind still caught in the grip of a nightmare cut short, he stepped around the familiar furniture made unfamiliar by shadows and fright. The barking made his shaking breaths jump, soft fur rushing past his legs. Everything danced under the steady beam of light, a wavering pool illuminating inert tables, chairs, the sink, hurrying paws and tails. He tried to follow the dogs as they scrambled about, barking, yelping, but no one was headed in the same direction. In a moment of forced rationality he chose one and followed it. Winston led him back to the bedroom without a sound. Without even thinking he knew who was there and he knew where she was; he just didn't want to see it. Bending down, bare knees touching the floorboards, one hand in Buster's soft bed, he stared under the bed and couldn't stop himself flinching away from the sight. She watched him closely while he took a deep breath, steadying the thumping in his chest. Slowly, he came to realise that the fear he felt wasn't purely his own.

"You can see me?"

"Yes. Yes, I can see you."

Will Graham reached out to Georgia Madchen and took her hand, cold and clammy, in his own.

"No, it wasn't a little irresponsible, it wasn't a little negligent," Crawford spoke as a kettle courting boiling point, "it was damn well *unacceptable*!"

"Then tell me why you fucking let me do it, huh?" Will shouted back.

"I *did not* just hear that," hot anger breached, Crawford stood with his hands planted firmly on his desk, as if holding himself back.

"Don't bullshit me, Jack," Will said, grabbing the messy file folder that had ended up thrown on Jack's desk; his haphazard notes on the second killer had become irrelevant as their

argument had grown, “you knew what I was doing, don’t make me out as some sort of damn martyr.”

“*Sit* down.”

Two sobering words which halted Will’s feet as they automatically stepped towards the door, hand itching to grab the handle and leave. The glass door afforded him a narrow view of the office floor, of the agents and operatives studiously glued to screens and phones; anything but acknowledge the raging fight happening a few feet away in their boss’s office. They, Will thought as he tried to calm his frayed nerves, were far more savvy than he. He took a deep breath, turned and sat down carefully. He took the folder in both hands and shuffled it, tapping it on his knee to allow the papers and photographs to slide back inside. Jack sat down. The office was dimly lit at this time of evening, but not enough to turn on the lights. They sat in relative silence, Will with both hands on the folder, Jack with his fingers running over his mouth, sitting back in his chair.

“I’m starting to think you enjoy making my life difficult,” Jack said eventually, some of the anger drained, leaving only an irritable residue, “Will, I have a lot to contend with in this job, not least of all explaining you to Purnell and Hatcher. I’m allowed to keep you on because you get results but when you pull stunts like this it makes it difficult for me to qualify your position.”

“You knew what you were asking when you hired me,” Will said.

“Yes, *I* knew,” Jack nodded, “or at least this doesn’t surprise me. Management didn’t. The more you put yourself at risk the closer they pull the leash around my neck. I won’t have you jeopardise the good thing we have going here. Understand?”

“I...” Will licked his lips and avoided Jack’s eyes, “yeah, I understand. It’s just...”

“Will.”

Everything that was happening with him was so simple to explain, only not so simple to deal with the fall out. Will knew what Jack wanted, to understand exactly what was happening so that he could deal with the situation. He was a practical man, work done by the numbers; four, five, six, fixed, everyone alive, neat score. No hairs out of place. Everything accounted for. Rules bent but not broken; and there came the fracture. It wasn’t that Will didn’t respect the rules, more that he knew what had to be done to keep everyone safe, victims and colleagues alike. Even perps, when he hadn’t fallen hard enough to wish them the same fate as those whose lives they took. When he’d fallen too hard, when the tar crept up his throat and out into his smile. Jack saw it, he knew Jack saw it. So when he heard his name said in *that* voice, tinged with apprehension and irritation, Will didn’t sneer or snap or sink to any of the other animalistic things his base nature was provoking him to do. He kept his mouth shut and he listened.

“We’re both under a lot of stress,” Jack said, going as far as Will knew he would to share the blame, “but I need you to talk to me. This wasn’t like Hobbs, this wasn’t like Budge, this wasn’t you reacting to life or death; this was you going out on your own in the middle of the

night, without backup, to a crime scene that the perp had returned to. We hunt killers, Will. No one should know that better than you."

"Georgia Madchen isn't a killer," Will defended, unable to stop himself, "I knew that then and I know that now."

"That isn't the point," Jack shook his head, "even you're not stubborn enough to deny that."

"...Yeah, I guess I'm not," Will said, running his hand through his hair, trying to be reasonable "I'm not even sure what led me back out there. I just needed to know. Something didn't seem right and...I needed to know."

Now the cautious tone was matched by a cautious look in Jack's eyes. He sat forwards and leaned his forearms on his desk. Will laid the folder down over his knees. That he had no memory of returning to Greenwood that morning or why he had even done so made his answer vague and unclear; he knew Jack had noticed. As far as Will was concerned there was no need to mention his episode, or the hypothermia, or Lecter. Some things were best left vague.

"You know, over these last few weeks I thought you'd been getting better," Jack said, refusing to sugar coat it, "but now I have to say it. I'm concerned about you, Will."

"Officially or unofficially?" Will asked with a wry twist to his lips.

"That depends," Jack said thoughtfully, "on how much you want to rectify it."

"I'm already seeing a psychiatrist, isn't that enough?"

"An unofficial psychiatrist can only deal with unofficial problems," Jack cautioned.

"Well..." Will hesitated; he knew Lecter had been hired as an asset, Jack's own eye into Will's psyche at any given time. Jack would hate to lose that. He held off informing him of the change, that he was now technically Lecter's patient, knowing that Jack would surely find out soon enough when he asked Hannibal for his notes, "then it's an unofficial problem."

"For now." Jack said concernedly, "I need to know you're working out the flaws, not working them in. If I need to find someone else then you need to..."

"Do you know anyone without flaws who can do this job half as well as I can flawed?" Will asked, his smile strained, tasting the bitter words in his mouth, "It comes with the territory. I made my own choices, Jack, I could have said no."

"I haven't exactly given you many outs," Jack admitted.

"And I turned down the few you did," Will said; he wasn't sure when this meeting had turned into a crusade to reassure Jack Crawford. It might have been around the time he picked up on the other man's cracking tension, his undercurrent of hateful worry. Will thought of Bella and it made him resent his own selfishness, "the last thing you need to do is worry about me, Jack."

You have someone you're paying to do that for you, he wanted to add but, somehow, that seemed demeaning to Hannibal's role. Still, he knew Crawford picked up on his inference. The man was sharp, fair when he needed to be, but pushed close to an edge that wouldn't break him when he fell. Will knew what Jack was doing and the misplaced sense of concern told him that Bella wasn't allowing the concern to be used for her sake. He waited for Jack to speak, in case he might want to talk. Of course he knew he never would. Still, Will waited.

"Alright," Jack said eventually, "I'll leave it with you and Dr. Lecter. I won't say that the buck stops at me, you know it doesn't; anything goes wrong and it's my ass. I don't want to have to pick you up and put you back together, alright? You've already killed twice since I put you back in the field. That's enough for most people to deal with."

"Good thing I'm not most people then," Will said, trying for amiability.

"Yeah, well," Jack said, flicking his eyebrows up as he sat back in his chair with a sigh. Will recognised the subtle signs that they were done. He stood up, folder in hand, but Jack continued, "oh and about the phone situation, head down to Jackson at requisitions, he'll get you a secure phone until you get a replacement."

"Actually," Will said, thinking of the gift awkwardly, "I, ah, I already have another phone. Handed it in to get screened, shouldn't take too long."

"Alright," Jack looked momentarily curious but it passed, "good. Then I'll see you tomorrow, first thing. We need to hassle Dr. Kimble for an interview with Madchen. He's a tough bastard but I'm sure you can talk your way past him."

"Right," Will said, just glad he'd avoided having to explain himself, "sure."

This is exactly the kind of shit I don't need to deal with, was what Will thought as he changed back into his wet jeans and shirt. It wasn't pleasant to remove the soft thermals and replace them with heavy, damp clothes but there hadn't been much of a choice. Will found the utility room with only a few minutes searching around. Down a short flight of stairs and into a small basement. It was spacious and clean, unlike any other basement he'd ever been into; terracotta coloured ceramic tiles, cream walls where there weren't cupboards, a steam cleaner and a butler's sink, lit by high powered strip lights. Subtly expensive, not that it surprised him at all. Will didn't think Lecter would stand for any sort of dirt in his home or upon his person. The thought only brought up the one thing he was trying his best not to think about. Will placed the thermals he'd been wearing into the washing machine and then searched a couple of cupboards until he found washing powder. Set to forty, turned on, any evidence disposed of; Will felt marginally better, even as he also felt as if he were fourteen again, washing his bed sheets before his dad woke up. You're a fucking mess, he told himself as he placed the soft jumper on the counter above the washing machine and tumble dryer.

It was only made worse when he returned to the drawing room. Will blinked, peering in; no sign of Hannibal but for the book the man had been holding, now placed upon the coffee table, pages slightly bent. Will swallowed, feeling a little out of place, and listened for any sounds of movement. There were none. He checked the kitchen but it was empty and nothing was out of place. The dining room offered the same undisturbed emptiness, making Will feel antsy.

He'd only been ten minutes hadn't he? He bit the inside of his lip and automatically reached for his phone before remembering that it was gone. Will cursed under his breath, a vague memory of underlit snow filtering in through his hazy mind. The phone in the hallway was working fine and Will called in to Quantico while he searched for his keys. As he was patched through to Jack he grasped the jagged metal in his fist, remembering; his car would still be at Greenwood. He fingered the keys while he spoke, trying his best to sound calm and rational even though he didn't feel it. After replacing the receiver Will, in a last ditch effort, ascended the opulent staircase and checked Lecter's bedroom. He was almost glad to find it empty, feeling suddenly invasive and wondering, as he shut the door, what he would even have done if Hannibal were there.

On descending to the entrance hall Will stalled, hearing what was surely the telltale purr of the Bentley's engine from outside. He frowned, wondering both where Hannibal could have gone so quickly and simultaneously worrying as to where to put himself. He ended up walking back into the drawing room and sat down, then stood up and walked to the window, and then fidgeted and sat back down again. This is damn ridiculous, he thought, shaking his head, get a grip on yourself. The front door opened and closed, loud footsteps on the wooden floorboards. Will looked over his shoulder as Lecter entered, looking nowhere near as tired as Will would have expected, and carrying an incongruous box.

"Good morning, Will," he said as if it were a perfectly normal occurrence.

"Uh, yeah," Will replied for lack of a better greeting; his eyes appraised Lecter automatically and Will quickly distracted them with talk, "look, I'm sorry about last night, I didn't..."

"Do not apologise," Hannibal interrupted him, "I have already asked you not to ask for forgiveness when you are in need of help," another quick glance at the man and Will continued to involuntarily drink in a host of new observations; how Lecter moved as he walked into the room and placed the box on the coffee table: a contained elegance. The subtle blue beneath his narrow eyes: more tired than he was letting on. The warmth in the subtle maroon of his iris's as he caught Will's gaze. Will scratched at the back of his neck and told himself to focus, looking away with a sick guilt in his gut.

"Not just for calling you," Will tried to justify, clasping his hands, "I mean about the pills, about...I disregarded everything you've tried to tell me because I was feeling..."

"Rebellious?" Lecter suggested when Will hesitated.

"Frustrated," Will corrected wryly.

A telling silence, in which Will could feel that Lecter was weighing up whether to ask a question or not. Will swallowed. His continuing resentment at Hannibal's lies about Abigail bit at him, mixing inexorably with the dream, with long fingers and sharp eyes, with a soft smile and...

"Can I assume this has anything to do with Freddie Lounds?"

To say he was surprised was only a short lived truth. The words knocked him out of his reverie in the worst way possible. Will looked at Hannibal and scrutinised his face; nothing was forthcoming.

"And here I thought you didn't read the trash columns," Will said, his hands clasping tighter.

"Since Ms. Lounds' continued association with Abigail," Hannibal said as he walked to the window and observed the lane, turning back to silhouette himself against the bright sunshine, "I thought it prudent to always keep myself abreast of her most recent activities."

"Jack's having it taken down," Will said bluntly, not willing to talk about it.

"But not before many thousands of people have read it," Hannibal said, walking back to the couch and taking a seat across from him; Will hated the thought, "and believed the lies she has written."

Lecter's words gave him an unspeakable sense of relief, even as he tensed at the thought. Will blinked, looking down at the table before him. In a way it was a relief to know Hannibal thought what was written was untrue but the tone in his words spoke volumes. He didn't assume the article to be lies, as Jack had, but he knew *it not to be true. The certainty in Hannibal's tone told him that. How far does he see into you? Will asked himself. Another thing he did not wish to talk about.*

"Could I ask you another favour?" Will asked, quickly diverting the conversation.

"Of course," Lecter said without hesitation.

"I need to get back to my car," Will said, "it's still at Greenwood."

"I have four hours until my first appointment," Lecter said, "enough time to retrieve your car and return."

"Thank you," Will said, hoping it sounded as heartfelt as he intended it to be, "I...thank you."

"Not at all," Lecter said, standing.

Will realised, as he too stood, that he was not only trying and failing to avoid the issue, but was now trapping himself in a car with the man for an hour or so. He could feel the flush at his throat and tried his best not to dwell on the dream or his own realisations; or about his still underlying resentment. He distracted himself with the first thing he could grab onto.

"What's in the box?" he asked, looking at the white, angular lines and silver embossing.

“It is for you,” Lecter said matter-of-factly.

“...Sorry what?” Will said after a pause, looking straight into Lecter’s eyes.

“I am sorry to say that your phone, if you recover it, will surely no longer be functional,” Lecter explained, making Will’s mouth feel dry, “I did not see it when I found you.”

“You bought me a phone,” he said; not a question. Will looked down at the box and shook his head. He hadn’t seen that *coming, taking a few seconds to react, “I can’t accept that. No, I...”*

“It is the least I can do,” Lecter said; Will couldn’t understand that sentiment, although he could think of another.

“I lost it,” Will said, tone blunt, “I can get myself a new one.”

A silence that spoke of unresolved issues. Will licked his lips and met Hannibal’s gaze, one which had barely left him since the man had returned. His own rabid empathy tried desperately to connect with what he saw there but hit nothing but a brick wall. He shook his head and let his breath out slowly.

“It is a gift,” Lecter said, “but if it makes you feel uncomfortable, then I will give you the receipt.”

“Thank you,” Will said as Lecter produced the receipt from his wallet and handed it to Will along with the box, knowing that it could be taken either way.

He walked with Hannibal as the man retrieved his coat and slipped into it. Will put his hands in his pockets and wished he could just go home and sleep.

“I sense that you have something more to ask me,” Lecter said as they approached the front door.

“I do?” Will said sarcastically, “First I’ve heard about it.”

“Please do not be facetious,” Lecter said as he pulled on his gloves; Will took a breath and shifted on his feet. He didn’t want to do this, he didn’t want to breach this topic again. He wanted it done and buried, gone out of sight and mind. Only he knew it wouldn’t be, not until he knew, not until he was sure...

“Alright,” he said, nodding, “alright.”

He turned and looked Hannibal in the eyes. The itching to know became a burning; as much as he had cooled it since he discovered Lecter’s deception, now did it once more flare up inside of him.

“Why did you lie to me?”

The other man sustained the eye contact, blinking only once.

“It was my lie, and I had to lay in it,” Hannibal said, tipping his head slightly to the left, “I did not wish to force you to lie in it with me.”

“You don’t need to protect me,” Will said, even though the explanation made him feel marginally closer to forgiveness than the previous resentment; yet the subtle innuendo in Lecter’s words also hadn’t passed him by. He swallowed and looked away when Hannibal continued to stare, “Something like that happens again, like Abigail happens again, anything like that,” Will said strongly, “I need to know about it. I need you to tell me.”

“I understand, Will,” Hannibal said candidly.

The evidence room was cooler than the warmed hallways, sending a rash of goose bumps over his arms as he walked through the racks of brown boxes with a chit in his hand. He’d told himself he wouldn’t get obsessed over this, wouldn’t let the idea become all encompassing; it never worked. Right now, with everything that was clamouring around in his skull demanding attention, he needed a distraction.

“You need both out, Will?” Reggie asked as Will brought out the box labelled *Budish* and sat it next to *Wells*; Will liked Reggie, he was a stand up guy. Had worked evidence for as long as Will had been at the Academy, gaunt in the face but sharp in the eyes, nothing in evidence was ever out of place with him around. Will was just glad that Reg seemed to like him too, probably something to do with being meticulous and thorough. He always made sure everything was in order when it was handed back.

“Yeah,” Will said, signing the sheet when Reggie was done writing in the digits, “can I have the spare for the archives?”

“Sure,” Reggie said, tossing him the key, “you’re the only one that uses the place after five. Need a hand carrying them over?”

“Yeah,” Will nodded, “thanks Reg.”

He took a moment to turn on the lights he needed. The archives were always quiet at this time, if not empty and closed down for the night as they were now. Tall ceiling, long rows upon rows of journals, archived case files, textbooks. Will always thought it felt dry in amongst all that paper, dry and sleepy. He commandeered a table by the window just so he could see the dark outside and laid out his boxes systematically, one half Budish, the other Wells.

He placed the file he’d been carrying on Wells’ side and flipped it open, pulling out the copy of his report, marked with biro and highlighter. He scanned over everything he’d picked out: Wells' growing dementia as a factor against his creation of the totem, the unexplained raising of the totem in the sand, the unexplained tyre tracks. Still hadn’t thought of a way to get the totem upright yet. The rope was tied tight, wound around like a bandage over the wood and limbs, only it didn’t seem to have lost any tensile strength or moved out of place. If there had been a hook attached it would have been hooked through the rope, that would have been an

obvious choice, only doing so would have slackened it, moved it, caused the perfect structure to warp. Will dropped the sheet down onto Wells' box. There was no way to work through something he didn't have the evidence for yet. Instead, he moved to the other side of the table.

Something had been bothering him, ever since his unease about Wells had driven him to see a second hand in the man's work. Made him think back to further misgivings he'd had. Budish had been one; at the time he'd tried to bring up the holes he saw, the ragged edges where their theories didn't meet, but Jack had been adamant that it didn't matter anymore. Budish was dead and they had enough evidence to bury him far deeper than six feet. At the time Will hadn't pushed for more because he'd been glad to see the back of the case. The nightmares it had caused had been particularly bad and, once or twice, manifested in waking visions. Will could still remember feeling Budish talk to him, kneeling at his feet, even as the man was strung up, hanging from chains in the ceiling like a grotesque butterfly. Now, a little more clear headed than he had been, Will opened up the manila folder and pulled out the crime scene photographs of Budish's death.

"Displayed like an angel on a stain glass window," Will murmured to himself; the photograph of Budish, hanging from the ceiling before the light of the windows behind him, looked almost divine in its layout.

Only that hadn't been the point. Will frowned. Budish hadn't been obsessed with iconography, he hadn't even been fanatically religious if his wife was to be believed. The man simply didn't want to die in his sleep, only the route he took to securing his peace was not so simple. Photographs of his victims, stripped, heads bowed, backs open. Will fished in the box for the post mortem and placed the photos side by side.

There had been no hesitation in Budish's cuts but they had been made with a broad bladed knife and even cut away more than intended in places. He'd known what he wanted, he had seen the vision of his design, but hadn't been trained in the skills to get him there. What he had been was methodical and practical. He had become convinced that he must cleanse the darkness from his victim's souls and, in elevating them to facsimiles of angels, save both them and himself.

Will stopped. The word rang in his mind like a slow bell, tolling beyond a far hill. Facsimile. He picked up the post mortem photos and cycled through them. How Budish had managed his final display had been a bone of contention between Jack and himself, and even Zeller, Price and Beverly. Will had been adamant that he couldn't have done it alone, while Jack and Price had been able to explain it. A convoluted explanation, but an explanation nonetheless, including razor wire and a rigged chain motor that they'd found at the scene. They'd ended up as a hung jury, with Zeller and Beverly agreeing with Will, Price with Jack. Unluckily for him, Jack was the be all and end all, no matter the tipped scales.

Now, looking at the cuts on Budish's back, something seemed wrong. A facsimile – a good facsimile, but one none the less. Zeller had agreed that the razor wire could have easily stripped the flesh from his back and there had been blood on the wire stretched between the two pole grips at the scene. Only Will hadn't bought it. To be able to carve such an immaculate 'wing' into his own flesh without even looking at what he was doing, it seemed

improbable. He picked up the tox-screen and flicked through. Budish had been on enough pain killers to down a horse. So he wouldn't have felt it, and it would have prevented shock from setting in, but it would have made his movements sluggish. No room for sculpting a masterpiece when you were high on morphine.

Yet the cuts had most definitely been made when Budish was still alive. Profuse bleeding, the report said, signs of brief coagulation. Will flicked back to the post mortem and his eyes sighted on something odd, something he hadn't seen before; ligature marks under the rope around his hands but not his feet. How the hell did I miss this? Will thought with concern as he read through.

EXTERNAL EXAMINATION:

The body is that of a well-developed, well-nourished Caucasian male, approximately 35 years of age. The body measures 71 inches and weighs 168 pounds...

Will skipped down, running his finger over the report.

Rigor mortis is fully developed in the major muscle groups. Livor mortis is fixed and purple posteriorly in the feet, ankles and calves...(he skipped further down, eyes scanning for the words he needed to see)*...Lividity markers present on both right and left wrists, abrasion trauma to the skin present. On initial examination impossible to determine lividity beneath skin abrasion on right and left ankles due to livor mortis pooling. However, on a second examination post-exsanguination, can be confirmed no lividity markers present on right and left ankles. Skin abrasion is present. The nares are patent and contain no foreign...*

Will bit at the inside of his cheek, recognising it as an addendum. He flipped to the last page and read the date, blinking. This was three days after the initial autopsy, he thought, this is a re-issue. He looked to the signatures at the bottom of the page. Acting Coroner, F. Hague; Re-issue Request – B. Zeller. Will looked at his watch, five fifty nine. He wondered if Zeller was still in the building. If he was he'd probably be in histology. Will decided to take the chance. He boxed everything up and signed it back in with Reggie, returning the key.

"Don't burn yourself out, Will," Reg called after him as he left; Will gave him a wave that offered no promises.

So his hands had been bound before he eventually died; cause of death: massive blood loss. That, mixed with his hypertension from prolonged morphine use, would have taken him out in about twenty minutes, or so the coroner had conjectured.

"So," Will murmured to himself as he rode the elevator up to the second floor, "who bound your feet, Elliot?"

And, if the inconsistencies in the cuts upon his back could be explained by a second pair of hands, who had cut the wings into Elliot's back? It would have taken great skill to cut just close enough to the skin not to nick any bones and also leave enough dermal tissue intact to keep the 'wings' attached to the body. An unsteady hand couldn't have shaved the skin clean off his back. His thoughts were interrupted as the elevator dinged open and he walked out into an empty corridor. The smell of cold air and chemicals, he didn't enjoy the labs. He

walked right until he hit the first junction and turned left into histology. It was difficult to tell at first who was still in as the two people there were bent over a table talking to each other. Will cleared his throat and the two started up, turning to reveal Zeller and his colleague Mark Grogan.

“Damn,” Grogan said, shaking his head, “you scared the crap out of me Graham.”

“Sorry,” he said on instinct.

“Will,” Zeller looked less antagonised, “are you after the blood screens on Georgia Madchen? They won’t be ready till...”

“Actually it was something else,” Will said, walking into the lab only a few feet, not wanting to intrude too far, “it’s about Elliot Budish.”

Zeller seemed to take a few seconds to transition, frowning slightly. Grogan turned back to the microscope while Zeller stepped towards him, out into the corridor.

“Budish?” he asked.

“You requested the second inspection by the coroner,” Will said.

“Yeah,” Zeller sighed, his face showing signs of old exasperation, “I wanted to check for lividity in the ankles.”

“Why?” Will asked.

“Because I agreed with you at the time, didn’t seem feasible that he didn’t have help,” Zeller said, “so I thought a re-examination might throw up some new evidence.”

“And it did,” Will prompted, “I read the re-issue. No lividity on either ankle.”

“But present in the wrists,” Zeller nodded, “I know what you’re thinking, I thought it too; someone else tied his feet after death occurred. Only there is a slim chance that the lividity in the ankles could have been overruled by the livor mortis displacement, the blood could have been squeezed out of the veins by the tightness of the rope and halted bruising before it even started, if he died fast enough.”

“How slim a chance,” Will asked, wondering why Zeller even had this theory to hand.

“Pretty slim,” Zeller said, “but possible.”

“Wait,” Will said, frowning, “you’ve already taken this to Jack, haven’t you.”

“Yup,” Zeller confirmed, giving Will a you-know look, “and it went as well as you with Wells. Needed more evidence, lividity wasn’t enough when it could still be explained. Then I got snowed under with samples for testing and never got a chance to look back. I’m surprised you did.”

“Well,” Will shrugged, giving the man a wry smile, “I don’t do much sleeping nowadays.”

“Yeah,” Zeller said, flicking his eyebrows up, “I know how that feels. By the way, Bev said she had something for you from trace earlier, I’m guessing she couldn’t get you on your phone? You might want to catch her tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Will said, wondering what it could be as the implications ran rampant through his mind, “see you.”

He swung by the techs on the fifth floor to pick up his phone before he left. It seemed to stare at him from his hand as he turned it on, making sure everything had transferred over without a hitch. Exactly the same make and model as his old phone, even down to the colour. It made him feel both uneasy and flattered that Lecter had this sort of information filed away on him inside that cunning head of his. Will took a deep breath and rustled the receipt in his trouser pocket with his left hand. He would pay Lecter back for the phone, he thought. Easier than returning it just to buy a new one right there and then; that would seem odd, he was sure. Yes, he would pay him back for it.

The sky was dark as coal when he exited the car park, signalling left. Thick clouds, no moon, no stars. He turned the radio on just to have some background noise above the rolling of the wheels on the tarmac. He jumped as he heard the phone vibrate and chime from the passenger seat, unused to the default sound. By the time he reached home he’d almost forgotten about the message at all. He bundled himself and the files he’d brought from work out of the car, having to go back for the phone after he’d dumped everything inside. Will leaned in and picked it up, turning the display on as he locked the car. The small ‘message unread’ symbol sat on the top bar; he touched it with his thumb.

I am glad to see you have accepted my gift

Will ground his teeth. He closed the door behind him and walked to the kitchen, the sound of his feet on the tile calling the dogs running from every corner of the house. He typed a reply while he pulled the cans out of the cupboard.

Thank you again but it’s too much. I’ll give you the money

Half way through dishing out the dog food, to the chorus of many whines and clacking of claws on the floor as Buster walked back and forth excitedly, the phone chimed. Will put the bowls down and picked it up as the dogs launched themselves on their dinner.

It is your prerogative. Please do not feel it is necessary. If you insist then you can repay me by attending on the 16th at 7pm – dinner party, formal wear

Will felt a headache coming on. He thought of what Alana had said of Lecter’s dinner parties. She always raved but then Alana liked parties, she liked people and she liked crowds. The thought of all three made Will want to lock all the doors and shut off the lights.

I don’t own any formal wear

He managed to make it through a full walk, back home, some quick pasta and cheese for dinner and brushing his teeth before he checked his phone again. There was a telling prickle

of disappointment when he found no reply waiting. Will closed his eyes and shook his head before heading to the bedroom. No, it was better this way.

The last thing he needed was this to complicate his already complicated life.

The interview with Georgia didn't go as well as Jack had hoped, which Will surmised from the blank look on the man's face. It had taken a lot of persuasion on Will's part to convince the doctor to let them in at all, then the result had been a straightforward but unrewarding interview.

"She isn't going to be able to give us more than she already has," Will reassured him on the drive back to Quantico, "she was telling the truth."

"Just seems a little unsatisfying, doesn't it?" Jack said, "Killing her best friend and not even knowing she's done it. Unsatisfying or convenient."

"Not when she remembers," Will said quietly, "then it won't be either."

He felt for her, perhaps more than was healthy to do so. When he'd seen her under his bed, watching him with unseeing eyes, she had seemed no more alive than she believed herself to be. Now, encapsulated within the hyperbaric chamber, she looked just like any other woman. Will knew she didn't want to remember what she had done. He knew because, whenever he *looked*, he never want to remember what he saw either.

He tracked down Beverly on their return. She was in prints with Price, looking over the results from Madchen's case. Jimmy was enthusiastically talking to Beverly as he pointed to an enlargement of an elongated fingerprint.

"...her dermal tissue didn't receive any blood flow," Jimmy was saying, "so when she grabbed the knife, it didn't even leave a normal print, instead it left this."

"And you're reconstructing it?" Beverly asked, turning when she saw Price's eyes go to the doorway, "Will, hey."

"Prints give you anything back?" he asked, walking in to stand next to her.

"Not yet," Price said, falling straight back into his enthusiasm, "only I haven't started my reconstruction yet. I have a new program, haven't tried it out yet, but I think I might be able to make sense of how to match her prints to the murder weapon. Not that it makes much difference considering she's confessed but, well, it would be a useful avenue if something like this ever happens again."

"Right," Will nodded, "let's hope it never does."

He walked with Beverly to trace once Price was done enthusing.

“I thought you’d want to see this,” she said as they trekked through the labs until they came to Metallurgy, “I found a hole in the totem, small, thin, but definitely out of place. It wasn't easy, but since we talked about a hoist or a grip, I thought maybe a spike or hook could have been put into the wood in order to lift it. When I went back and reexamined the portions we cut I found several holes driven into the wood.”

“What are you thinking?” Will asked, beginning to feel a bit like Price; enthused.

“Never mind thinking,” Beverly smiled cunningly, “ask me what I found in one of them.”

“There was something inside?” Will asked.

“Metal shavings,” she said, “I think something might have been screwed or jammed into the wood.”

Beverly was the first in. Gina Walters, a diminutive woman with bright red hair and slightly buck teeth looked up as they entered, “Hi Gina, what’s cooking?”

“The usual,” Gina answered, smiling at Beverly, “you here for the shavings?”

“Yeah,” Beverly said, following her to a large machine in the back corner that looked like an oversized microwave.

“I ran it through the ICP-AES,” Gina said as she typed quickly with her index fingers into the computer to the right of the machine, “and the results came back...a mix. It’s an alloy, 0.0030 and 0.0100. Iron and carbon.”

“Steel,” Will said to himself, “so it could have been a chain anchor.”

“Well if you like that,” Gina said, “you’re going to love this. Before I put it through I found paint on the shavings, not much, but just enough to get a run. GC-MS gave me a whole host. Epoxy primer, a layer with a fifteen percent urethane reducer. Vehicle paint, for an older model I’d say by the amount of care gone into it. Also picked up some Kirker single stage urethane. That’s just for aesthetics, makes the paint smooth and glossy.”

“So whatever was in there could even be a part of the vehicle,” Beverly looked like a cat with the cream, “thanks Gina, you’re a miracle worker. Could you send me the results?”

“Sure thing,” Gina said.

Will couldn’t stop his mind from racing as they walked back to the third floor. He told her about his theory of a tow truck or some sort of rescue vehicle. Beverly said it seemed a likely option.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Will said unable to hide his animation, “and never mind that, you’re the miracle worker here.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Beverly smirked.

It was Saturday morning before Will heard from Hannibal. So caught up in the sudden burst of evidence in his Second Killer case Will had completely forgotten about Hannibal's offer of dinner. Until nine forty on Saturday morning when there was a knock at the door. The dogs barked, rushing to the door, so much so that Will knew it was a stranger. There weren't enough wagging tails for someone they knew. He herded them into the living room and closed the door before heading back to answer to the knock.

"William Graham?" a man in a dark blue jacket and grey trousers stood on his porch holding a suit carrier in one hand and a clipboard in the other.

"Yes," he said, taking the clipboard when it was offered. He read the label on the bag: *Saint Laurie,* "uh, I didn't order anything."

"Sorry sir, I just deliver," the man said, taking back the clipboard once it was signed and handing Will the bag, "if you want to talk returns the phone number is on the invoice."

Will found himself left standing, bag in hand, as the delivery man drove down his driveway and out of sight. He walked back inside and put the bag down on the kitchen counter. Everywhere else was guaranteed to cover it in dog hair. He looked at it, cautious; checking the label showed his name and address. Will shook his head and opened it. The least he could do was get the invoice so he could inform them of the mistake and return it. He pulled up the plastic sheath and then unzipped the material bag beneath. As soon as he saw it he knew.

No excuses.

The note lay atop a brown jacket, soft golden lining exposed. Will stared at it for a full ten seconds before reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. No, he thought, *absolutely not*. He opened up the material flap of the bag and found the invoice inside. He pulled it out and walked stiffly through to his bedroom to retrieve his phone, dialling quickly. When he spied the address on the invoice his throat closed up.

"Good morning, Saint Laurie," answered a decorous female voice.

"...Hi, I just received a delivery," Will finally managed to get his voice to work, "I think it might have been a mistake."

"Oh, I'm very sorry sir," she said, "may I have the order number?"

"Yeah, it's seven seven four three one," Will said, "it has my name and address but I definitely didn't order it."

"Ah, yes," the woman said, "is this Mr. Graham?"

"Yes," Will said, closing his eyes and rubbing at his left temple.

"It appears the suit was ordered by another," she said; Will cut her off before she could continue.

“A Dr. Lecter?” Will asked.

“Yes sir, that’s correct,” she confirmed, making Will nod his head and grimace angrily.

“I need this suit returned,” he said sharply.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the woman sounded worried by his tone, “the suit was custom.”

“Custom?” Will barked, “I’ve never even been to your shop, how the hell could you make me a custom suit!”

“Please calm down sir,” the woman said, obviously not used to this sort of treatment, “we were given your measurements. I’m sorry this has caused such a problem, but I would need Dr. Lecter’s approval before I could issue a refund as he paid by...”

Will hung up. He was sure that it would put the woman’s back up but it was preferable to her hearing whatever would have come out of his mouth next. He looked at the phone in his hand and took a deep breath. This is fucking crazy and I’m not going to be a part of it. He opened the text scroll and typed agitatedly.

Phone them and tell them to give you a refund I’m not accepting this

No reply. Will took the dogs for a long walk, up and round the creek, over through the forest and back along the only just visible trail. Lady was acting a little better since Will had taken her to the vet; kidney problems. He’d started her on new, unfortunately expensive, food. Will was just glad she was back to her old self, jumping on Buster and biting at his ears when the other dog refused to give up the ball he’d been throwing. By the time he returned to the house a couple of hours later there was still no reply.

Will tried calling but it went straight to voicemail. He cursed under his breath and stopped himself from throwing the phone on the floor. He decided to work on his lures, anything to take his mind off of Lecter. Downside of that plan was that he couldn’t find them anywhere. Will checked his box but every single one of the lures he’d been working on were missing from it. Did I move them? He thought agitatedly. He couldn’t recall doing so. He’d just finished the last one, red with plume feathers. Will closed the box with a snap and spent the next half an hour searching the cupboards and kit bags for them. By lunchtime he was in a foul mood. Hannibal still hadn’t returned his call. He put the suit bag in his cupboard to keep it clean.

Half three seemed to roll around quicker than he expected as he continued to work on the case from home. When the phone rang he snapped it up, answering without looking at the display.

“It’s about time you...”

“Will?”

Alana’s voice. Will clamped his mouth shut and worked back the furious displeasure at it not being who he expected.

“Oh, hey,” he said, “sorry, I was expecting someone else.”

“Obviously,” she said, sounding mildly concerned, “is everything ok?”

“Yeah, fine,” he lied, “what do you need?”

“Well I was just wondering if you were going to Hannibal’s do tonight?” she asked, “My car’s in the shop at the moment and I could really use a lift.”

“I...” Will faltered, all ready to give a resounding *no*, “I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Really?” she sounded surprised, “Oh, ok. He told me you were going.”

Oh he *did*, did he? Will thought tersely. Arrogant son of a bitch.

“I thought I could but I can’t,” he lied rather vaguely.

“Alright,” Alana sounded suspicious but didn’t say anything more, “well, if you change your mind let me know.”

“Ok,” Will said; *I damn well won’t*, “goodbye.”

He hung up and stood, angry, in the bedroom. He put the phone down on the bed before walking to the wardrobe and pulling out the suit bag. He pulled off the plastic and opened the material zip all the way, extracting the suit from within before laying it on the bed; jacket, trousers, shirt, tie. Will didn’t know much about fashion, he would be the first to admit, but just feeling the material beneath his fingertips told him it was expensive. Soft and cool to the touch, he could tell the jacket was lined with silk. It was a milky chocolate, the trousers a warm grey, the shirt a play on the plaid he normally wore, all pale hues, the tie a soft brown. If he didn’t look at it too hard it would have been something he would pick up and happily wear.

Checking his phone once more, compulsively, showed no missed calls, no reply to his message. Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath. I know what this is, he said to himself, I know what he’s doing. So what do I do about it? Opening his eyes only compounded his reality. Will rubbed at his face and went to make himself a coffee. As he drank, the strong flavour leaving a bitter aftertaste, he tried to think his way out of the problem. There has to be a diplomatic way to do this, he thought. He could try not attending the dinner at all, but that wouldn’t be particularly diplomatic. In fact it would be rude, the last thing he wanted to be. Alright, Will thought sighing, so I go. I go, but I’m not wearing that suit. I’ll just wear my grey jacket and my blue shirt, they’re nice...sort of. Well, nicest I’ve got. The *only* ones you’ve got, his conscience corrected him.

Will finished his coffee and sat at the table, contemplating. He thought about the *‘damn well wont’* he’d thought earlier and shook his head. Why am I getting so angry over this? he asked himself. It’ll all work out, I’ll work it out. He rinsed his mug in the sink and tried not to think about warm maroon eyes and soft smiles.

Chapter End Notes

It takes anywhere from 12 weeks to 3 weeks to make a tailored suit, 3 being what you would pay the most money for in order to have it fast tracked. So Hannibal had it made well in advance because he is a cunning, devious bastard who loves to play chess with people's lives. But I love him anyway, it's hard not to.

La Parade Nuptiale du Chien Errant (la deuxième partie)

Chapter Notes

> In the timeline of this story Hannibal's feast from 'sorbet' did not occur, and this is its replacement. Due to all the problems surrounding Will, Hannibal was forced to push his 'sounder' back a couple of weeks. So in this timeline Will has never been to one of Hannibal's feasts.
>
> Also the feast itself is taken from the creator of the Hannibal food art, Janice Poon, from a feast she threw for the end of the first season as I understand it.

(Six years prior)

"Come on Graham, it's a party, there'll be alcohol and women. Even you can't complain about that."

Sat on his bed, 'The Boys from Brazil' *half curled open in his hands, Will Graham did not even consider his options.*

"No thanks, you go."

"Fucking hell," David shook his head and spoke his words half under his breath; loud enough to hear. Will hated his passive aggressive bullshit, "you know Cheryl upstairs? She wants you to come. Asked me to get you out of this damn apartment."

Oh I see, Will thought, unable to stop the associations forming. Cheryl Matthews, the cashier from Bradleys upstairs, was most certainly interested in him. He was well aware. So she'd employed Dave now, had she? Will thought. Poor bastard didn't even know he was playing middleman. Will looked up very briefly, eyes hitting the door frame rather than connect with Dave's blunt stare.

"I'm fine here," Will replied, "maybe you'll have more luck on your own."

"Yeah," Dave said knowingly, his voice fading as he pushed away from the door and walked towards the kitchen, "you're definitely right, nail on the head, ding ding ding we have a fucking winner..."

For not the first time since moving to Virginia had Will wondered what it would have been like if Grant Hedley hadn't bottled at the last minute and moved in with his folks. He'd met Hedley on his induction, both still essentially homeless once the year started, and they'd fallen together quite quickly out of necessity. Hedley didn't seem to mind Will's standoffishness and Will appreciated Hedley's quiet, considered nature. It had been a quick fix, finding an apartment in Floyd Street, moving in before first term started. Only Hedley

didn't show. It ended with Will's landlord clamouring for a second tenant, threatening Will with the full rent if he couldn't deliver. Dire times led to dire decisions: David Bressinden, another attendant of the Academy, had been the first to reply to the ad he'd stuck up on the cork board in the cafeteria.

"Dave," he called out as the man marched past his room toward the front door, "lock," it wouldn't be the first time he'd come home drunk at the weekend and left the front door open.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," the man bit out; the door slammed behind him.

He wasn't a bad guy, Will knew he wasn't; just rash, young and blinkered. Will listened as a chorus of voices from the apartment above sounded Dave's entrance. The music was turned up. Will licked his lips and pulled out his headphones, the long curly cord bouncing as he led it over to his small stereo, plugging in and clicking play to make the CD spin. The wire bounced against his knees like a bungee cord as he sat back down and leaned against the wall, eyes absorbed by the words on the page, and tried to ignore the vibration running through his back from the bass upstairs.

(The present)

"We're going to be late," Alana mused, checking her watch.

"We'll be fine," Will said softly.

"That's what you get for changing your mind at the last minute," she said, a slight sing song lilt to her tone.

"Yeah, well," Will would have continued but there was nothing else to say.

"You know I was more surprised at Hannibal saying you were coming tonight than you saying no," Alana said as she looked out the window at the traffic lights.

"You're not the only one," Will muttered, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Why *did* you change your mind?" she asked, curious, her dark eyes watching him closely.

The tapping turned into a tight grip, disguised by the changing of the lights as Will put his foot down slowly and drove them out onto the main road. It hadn't been a difficult or an easy choice, between staying alone, sitting in his ship at sea, comforted in his isolation, or putting himself into the car and turning the engine on. Truthfully his final action had left him feeling a little sick in his stomach, a feeling which hadn't left him since. He took a breath through his nose and tried to think of the most diplomatic way to cover for himself.

"It would have been rude not to," Will said, glad at least he'd managed to pull up some aspect of the truth.

"Oh, *now* you're worried about offending people," Alana couldn't stop her smile spreading, "where has that been since I met you?"

"That's a bit unfair," he said.

"Only just," Alana shrugged, smile still in place.

They entered together and Will knew that he'd made a mistake in not taking Hannibal's gift more to heart. It wasn't that he felt embarrassed to be the only person there not dressed to the nines, more that it made him one of the things he disliked most; singled out in a crowd. Normally his threadbare jacket and second (nicer) pair of trousers let him blend in quite nicely in academic circles, meetings at the bureau, allowed him to blur into a background where he could happily sit, unnoticed, and observe. Now he felt like a lighthouse in a sea of luxury cruise liners whose flags he didn't recognise. The drawing room was a throng of unknown faces. Next to him Alana looked the part; elegant and beautiful. Will wished he didn't care.

"Oh Alana," an older woman broke off from the crowd, dark hair in a bob too young for her face and a midnight blue dress that showed her jutting collarbone, "darling it's been so long since we've seen you. You look divine!"

"Nice to see you Margaret," Alana responded with a smile and a short, non invasive hug.

An inexplicable prick of annoyance stabbed at him; the room was normally so empty, calm, at peace. Will scatter searched the crowd but couldn't find anyone he knew.

"And who is your friend?" Margaret sounded like an insincere doting grandmother and Will tried to offer a smile as Alana introduced them.

"Margaret, this is Will Graham," Alana said, "he's a criminal profiler with the FBI."

Will wondered if every introduction in higher echelons of society started with name and occupation. Although, in this case, he thought it might not have been entirely necessary. As soon as Alana had given his name Margaret's eyes had snapped to attention and she did a poor job of hiding her surprise and her interest. Wonderful, Will thought with little humour, another Tattler fan perhaps? He tried and failed to meet the woman's gaze; he'd already decided he didn't want to.

"Ah yes, I've heard a lot about you, Will," Margaret said, placing a bejewelled hand on Will's arm that he purposefully stopped himself flinching from, "Hannibal speaks of you very highly."

Somehow, that she hadn't heard of him through the seedy media only made it worse. Hannibal spoke of him to people? What thoughts could that possibly entertain? Will itched for a drink only so he could have something to make him seem normal, distract people from the fact that he couldn't cope with this. The sick feeling in his stomach roiled higher. Instead he managed to pull off the smile he'd been going for and a quick, "Nice to meet you," before his eyes swung to the left to escape and found another pair watching him back.

Even in black, as far as Will was concerned, Hannibal Lecter stood out against the background of guests. A simple suit, without waistcoat, seemed far more fitting for his tall figure. Made him seem sleeker in the hips and broader in the shoulders. It accentuated the

elegant curve of his back. The tie matched his eyes. Will blinked and licked his lips, *you're doing it again*, wondering what the other two were saying as he lost himself for a moment or two. Something about '*works with Crawford'*, Alana's voice perhaps. Will wasn't paying attention. A surge of associated memory rammed at his conscience; hot breath against his hand, long fingers over folded pages, wide eyed ecstasy. Hannibal looked away, began talking to someone he couldn't see. Will returned himself to his own conversation, blinking guiltily, and wondered just how long he'd been staring considering the looks he was getting now.

"Sorry," Will said, covering all his bases, "in a world of my own there. What were you saying?"

"I was just saying you work with Jack," Alana said, watching him with a raised brow.

"Right," Will nodded, "of course. Is he here?"

"Oh yes," Margaret said, turning as her significant other, or so Will surmised, approached them, "he's here with that lovely wife of his. Where are they? Ah, there."

Will followed her gesture to find Jack and who he assumed to be Phyllis 'Bella' Crawford standing where Hannibal had been moments before, now absent. She looked barely as happy to be there as he did. Will was both glad he wasn't the only one and saddened that Jack was obviously trying too hard. A flower forced; Will thought Bella held the stem of her glass in too tight a grip. He heard introductions being done again while his eyes were turned. Thankfully any further interaction was halted by two words.

"Who's hungry?"

Will did not see Hannibal as he spoke but he followed the crowd regardless. They were herded to the dining room, now painted with light and music, and the table laid with exquisite symmetry. Will could appreciate its precision. He walked, observing the small folded rectangles of card denoting names in black cursive script; his was found between a name he did not recognise and another he did. Will was partly thankful that Hannibal had not decided to place him between two complete strangers, just to see what he would do. Or place him next to Hannibal himself.

"Will," Jack's voice was irrefutably sincere in its relief to find himself not seated next to a stranger, "I didn't know you were here. Ah," he turned slightly as his arm was touched by a long fingered hand, "have you met my wife, Bella?"

"No," Will said as they sat, leaning around Jack to offer his greeting, "hi."

"Call me Phyllis, please," she said; Jack cleared his throat and looked at his cutlery, fiddling with their placement.

Her eyes were strained and Will found himself affected by the undercurrent of desperation running through her quick glance. He sat back and took a deep breath. Looking quickly to his left he found an older man, grey hair high on his forehead, long Roman nose, smelling of expensive cologne. He ran his eyes across the table and found Alana on the other side, three

up towards the head. Will felt as if he were sitting in a cage of glossy parrots, each squawking at the next. An arm appeared over his shoulder holding a wine bottle; he held out his hand to cover his glass and the woman in the white shirt behind him disappeared without a word. Will looked down at his plate and sighed, leaning slightly towards Jack.

"I hope you know which fork to use first," he said, "because I'm copying you."

Jack smiled genuinely and that, at least, made Will feel slightly better. The ringing sound of a glass being tapped brought the light chatter to a halt. A woman with a small mouth and large blue eyes beneath an artful tumble of blonde hair stood. She surveyed them all with a keen eye that Will assumed many would take for openness.

"I think we should take a moment," her voice was high and her accent not local, "to congratulate the chef."

Before she had even seated herself the applause had started. Will hesitated for a moment in confusion before joining in. Who in the hell applauded dinner? Will knew that, even as Hannibal stood to accept his praise, toasting his guests with a glass of shimmering red wine, the man wasn't interested in this. His enjoyment wouldn't begin until the first mouthful had been taken in and savoured. Will halted his thoughts before they could march on. He swallowed down the sickness in his throat and looked at the reflection in his empty wine glass.

"Thank you all, it is a pleasure to have you for dinner this evening," Hannibal said, smiling, "now, without further ado, dig in."

A festoon of blood and seasoning. Every dish came with a carnivorous taste and an intricate design. Will enjoyed watching his plate as it was placed before him; a small microcosm of Hannibal Lecter's fastidious nature. Will couldn't help but feel they were delicate and somewhat personal, like small pleasantries given in ceremony. He felt it spoke to him but wasn't sure what it wanted to say about its creator. Or if he should even look.

The man seated beside him, one Francis Talibere as he found out, seemed intent on engaging him in conversation, whether for politeness' sake or because he too had been informed who Will was and wanted to probe; Will wasn't sure. Either way it was a nauseating distraction, to feel himself being drilled for information between courses. *I hear from my wife that you work with the FBI*. Will wasn't sure how to explain that his line of work wasn't exactly delectable. He was tempted to bring up the intricacies of his building case and what he was currently researching, *a range of different lacerations and wounds to the cutis: amateur to surgical*, but he was sure Jack wouldn't be pleased. Instead he just nodded and agreed or disagreed. Smiling was no longer an option.

The dishes were of a wide variety but with a connecting thread. Each built up a living picture of an animal as the courses were streamed in on white coated arms. Most of them he could stomach but, feeling as he did, some of them didn't sit right. As the dishes were announced they took on an abrasive sheen as he cut in. With every incision Will expected blood to run onto the white crockery. He felt a slight disappointment that the feast the parrots had demanded was distinctly less appetising than anything Hannibal had made for him before.

Nearly everything was some unsavoury part of the animal that Will wouldn't consider consuming on its own, no matter the garnishes that made a play for normalcy.

A small, tight lipped bowl of blood sausage with saffron butter beans to start. The sausage was deeply meaty but Will thought the saffron tasted like plastic. He'd forced it down only to be presented with spleen decorated with bacon, red onions and sage as a follow up. That most certainly did not sit well with his unsettled gut. He managed two mouthfuls before he had to stop and drink a mouthful of water. It didn't help. The flavour had coated his mouth and stuck. He looked up to find the glass-tapping announcer laughing, her plate clean. He put down his fork on his plate and waited. Jack muttered something to him about abattoirs and Will could only hum in reply.

After the fourth dish, lung a la basquase, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to keep much more down. Three mouthfuls and the texture began to fuel his nausea even if the taste was somewhat palatable. He hadn't asked when the next set of white plates made their way to the table. Unfortunately one of the women seated across from him did; brain cannelloni with chanterelle mushrooms. He'd eaten it because, from the taste, he never would have known. With every mouthful his mind told him he was consuming unknown thoughts. Will blinked and swallowed with every bite.

Next something at least more traditional; pork loin with tuna sauce. Will hadn't trusted the change as he pooled up the last of the deeply fishy sauce on the dip in his fork, finishing the dish. He found he was right, the next being tongue en papillote. Wrapped in its delicate sheath of curled paper, the tongue appeared trapped inside a scarred mouth. He had peeled it back slowly, wincing as the paper tore. Cracked lips peered at him from the table, grimacing. He thought he felt eyes on him but ignored it. Whoever was staring could very well enjoy his blank gaze as far as he was concerned. He had tried it out of politeness; a surprisingly light flavour. It went down but sat awkwardly on the already high pile forming.

Desert shouldn't have surprised him. Blood and cocoa pudding with chantilly cream. Will took a small spoonful of the cream and the sweetness smacked his savoury saturated palate. He felt green. Thankfully no-one seemed disturbed by his excusing himself quietly from the table and walking as slowly as he could to the downstairs bathroom. Everything tasted worse on the way back up; a slurry of gourmet cooking and bile. Will washed out his mouth but everything still stuck, still coated. He looked up into the mirror and thought he could see blood on his lips but knew it was just the scrubbing he'd given them with the towel that had brought out the flush.

It had been suffocating on their return to the sitting room, smoky with idle chatter, the smell of brandy and stale laughter. Will felt empty and slightly weak in the constitution. The taste of sick lingered in his mouth and he refused to talk to anyone. When his watch sounded its quiet alarm he had almost thanked whoever needed thanking and escaped as quickly as he could, walking strictly to the kitchen to find something to drink that wouldn't interfere with his medication. He would have killed for a glass of whatever Hannibal had been drinking but knew it would only lead to disaster. Instead he pulled open the fridge and found a three quarters full bottle of cranberry juice. He pulled it out and placed it on the counter before

retrieving a glass from the cupboard by his head. Two pills out, down and swallowed. The juice was cold and snapped at his teeth.

"You seem to know your way around," came a vaguely familiar voice from the doorway; Will turned to find Phyllis Crawford walking into the kitchen, looking tired, "do you know where he keeps the Alka-Seltzer?"

"Uh," Will hesitated not only at the statement but also on realising that he did in fact know; he slipped his pills into his jacket pocket, "yeah. Hang on."

Once more returning from the downstairs bathroom, after rifling the cabinet under the sink, he handed over the two round, white tablets and a glass of water. Phyllis stood by the counter and dropped them in, fizzing noisily.

"Not that I don't appreciate the food," she smiled as if talking to herself, "my stomach's just been a little sensitive recently."

"Well," he was unsure what to say but grabbed at the first thing he could think of; that he'd vomited most of the evening down the toilet didn't seem appropriate, "you ate all your spleen. I couldn't get more than a spoonful down."

Phyllis smiled; warm and slightly rusty. Will took a long sip of his juice and couldn't help but grimace at the mixing of flavours. At the very least the sharpness of the cranberries outweighed the sting of the bile. He bit at the inside of his cheek, more than aware he was being scrutinised.

"You know, it's nice to finally be able to put a face to the name," Phyllis said, taking a seat on one of the stools by the island counter, "Jack talks about you and I was never sure what to imagine."

"I get that a lot," Will said.

A short silence but, thankfully, not an awkward one. Will licked at the bitter sweet taste on his lips and swallowed. His mind flickered back and forth like an old light bulb ready to short; civil and polite, ready to snap, polite, snap, polite...

"So," Phyllis said; she was smiling wryly when he flicked his gaze to her, "obligation?"

"I'm sorry?" he asked, sufficiently derailed by the non-sequitur.

"You don't seem to want to be here anymore than I do," she said, taking her glass down in three large gulps; it was returned to the counter with a clack and a grimace.

"Oh," he said, "yeah, well...obligation might be the most apt description."

"Jack likes to think he can look after everyone at once," she shook her head, her smile shifting to affectionate, "never stops to ask."

"I can empathise with that," he nodded; most definitely, he thought. He looked up and found her watching him. His eyes scattered and his mouth ran away with him, "Jack told me about

the cancer. I'm sorry."

A silence he couldn't initially read because he had just realised how insensitive he was being. He turned the glass slowly in his hand and fished in his trouser pocket for a mint. It perfumed his mouth pleasantly but didn't sit well with the cranberry. Will wondered if anything he put in his mouth tonight would sit right with him.

"For me or for bringing it up?" Phyllis asked bluntly.

"Both," Will said, shaking his head.

"Then you're just as bad as he is," she sounded angry but not at him; Will looked at her as she studied the far wall. The last thing he'd wanted to do was upset her.

"You want my honest opinion?" Will asked after a pause.

"That's all I ever want from anyone," she said.

"Then I think you're very brave to still be in love even after being told it's not going to last," Will said.

Her face changed. At first he couldn't see just how. Then, as she smiled, he realised it had been surprise. Phyllis tangled her fingertips together and shook her head.

"You know, that's the first time I've been able to appreciate the word brave in a long time," she said, "the nurses, they use it. I feel like telling them to shove their bravery. Bravery doesn't slow my body breaking down. It doesn't stop anything. But I...yes. I suppose I'm glad to hear it's noticeable I'm still in love."

"Jack he..." Will didn't want to go too far but she was watching him intently now, her once dull eyes keen and glassy, "I can see it in him when he mentions you. He cares about you, a lot. Most people never find that."

"I just hope nothing turns to obligation," she said; Will couldn't tell if she was talking about Jack or herself.

"Obligation for love isn't the same as dinner, I'm sure," he said with a forced smile.

Phyllis nodded, leaning against the counter. Her sable hair bounced forwards over her shoulder. She appeared to be focusing on him, he guessed to take the focus from herself. Will went with the change, even if it grated.

"That's for me, though," she asked, her chin resting in her cupped hand as she leaned against the counter, "for you, I'm guessing Dr. Lecter?"

"I..." Will was forced to meet her eye, confused as to her phrasing; dinner, right? He thought, "yes, he asked me to come."

"He's a difficult man to refuse," she said, looking off into the middle distance, "so, how long have you two been together?"

Will nearly choked on his cranberry juice as he washed down the mint he wasn't enjoying. He swallowed, just, before coughing roughly and waving his right hand. He'd misjudged that to his own detriment.

"No," he coughed again, "that's not..." he cleared his throat roughly, "he's my psychiatrist."

"Oh," Phyllis looked at him keenly, "I'm sorry, I just assumed."

"Can I ask *why*?" Will knew he was being defensive and tried to stop; het up, claustrophobic Will Graham did not react well to accusations, especially when they held a mote of truth.

"Ah," she smiled, looking down at her empty glass, the sides crusted with grains of undiluted tablet, "well, I would call it women's intuition but I think that might demean me," she looked up, watching him softly, "before you arrived he kept watching the door. I wondered why but then he didn't call dinner ready until you arrived. At the first mouthful of every new dish he was looking at you. I think he wanted to see your reaction. Honestly, if you're not involved I would maybe say something to him. Poor man seems infatuated."

"That's..." Will hadn't expected such a concise analysis; I can see why Jack is smitten with her, he thought as he tried to collect himself. He wasn't composed enough to flatly deny it and her words had hit him harder than she knew, he was sure, "it's complicated. I'd rather not talk about it."

"Sorry," she said, "didn't mean to intrude. I've developed a blunt streak of late. Sometimes find myself hammering people over the head with it."

"That's alright," Will said, feeling anything but alright, "I admire candour. It's not easy to be honest."

"Yes," she said, nodding softly, "it certainly isn't."

"Ah, our errant guests."

Will looked to his right and found the devil himself walking through the doorway with a tray of used, empty glasses, followed by Jack with a slightly worried look on his face; it smoothed from existence as he spied Phyllis, walking to her side. Hannibal looked to Will as he drained the last of his drink and rinsed the glass compulsively in the sink. With some distance between them it had been bearable; now he felt like a thief as Phyllis's words ran circles in his head. He took Phyllis's and rinsed hers too, to which she gave a soft 'thank you'. He knew Hannibal had clocked the white grains crusting the glass.

"I do hope the food was not too rich," Hannibal said to Phyllis, "I am generally apt to err towards heavier fare."

"No, not at all, it was delicious," Phyllis said, standing and allowing Jack to put his hand on the small of her back; Will didn't miss her eyes flick between himself and Hannibal as he stood back from the sink, drying his hands on a tea towel, "you'll have to excuse me, I'm really very tired."

"We can go, if you'd like," Jack said, looking to her, his voice lowered but still audible. She nodded, "then we should head home I think. Hannibal, as always thank you for a wonderful evening."

"It was my pleasure," Hannibal bowed minutely forwards, "you are both welcome any time."

"Will, I'll see you tomorrow," Jack said.

"Right," Will replied, "have a safe trip home."

"Goodnight," Phyllis said to them both, offering Will a small smile which he returned.

He felt there was something visceral there that he had only just realised. The gesture of one wounded animal to another. The thought made his nerves tetchy, watching the empty doorway and hearing the sounds of the feasters from beyond. The hand on his shoulder made him jump. Hannibal took back the offending appendage as Will looked at him and cleared his throat.

"Sorry, you startled me," Will said in a low voice, putting his hands in his pockets.

"You seem on edge," Hannibal noted as he returned to his task, offloading the tray; the hired waiters entered, each bearing identical trays, setting them down before leaving without a word. Hannibal waited until they were alone to continue, "I sense Mrs. Crawford was not the only one with whom the food disagreed."

"I haven't been feeling myself today," Will realised his statement held too many connotations and stopped, taking his hands out of his pockets to help Hannibal in his task.

"I can understand that my cooking is not to everyone's taste," Lecter said.

"My tongue and my stomach weren't exactly in agreement," Will explained, trying to be as nice as possible, his eyes flicking up to check the room was still empty, "and I think reducing my dose so heavily might have put me off my stride."

"Hmm," Hannibal mused, watching him out of the corner of one maroon eye, "then perhaps I should revise the schedule. I will look it over; there may be something I can give you to compensate."

"I still have Meclizine," Will said, running out of reserves with which to remain civil, "for the nausea."

"Please, Will," Hannibal said, "I asked you not to fight me on treatment. I will work out something suitable."

Will closed his eyes and took a breath. The cold stems of glass between his fingers felt fragile, as if he could snap them were he to apply too much pressure. He placed them down carefully before he did something he regretted. His empty stomach twisted and contracted like a cobra. Keeping his eyes on the far wall he listened to Hannibal behind him, glass connecting with counter, again and again.

"You aren't even going to acknowledge it," he said, "are you."

"Not if you do not wish to discuss it," Hannibal did not miss a beat; Will felt more lost with his suspicions confirmed. He reminded himself not to underestimate Hannibal's keen intelligence.

"I'd rather you didn't fob this back onto me," Will said, "I think I made myself clear. I don't need your charity or your gifts. I am paying you back and I want you to get a refund for the suit."

"I believe you will understand that to be a difficult task," Lecter said; Will could imagine the slight lines visible by the man's eyes which appeared when he was displeased, "that suit is made for you. No other could wear it."

"And I'm not even going to ask how *that* happened," Will said, placing his palms flat on the counter, "is there anything I can lock away that you won't ferret out?"

"Not when you hand me the key," Lecter replied, "and invite me so willingly inside."

Alright, Will thought as he shook his head and let Lecter's innuendo pick at his problem, now he's just yanking my damn chain. He set his jaw and spoke clearly, precisely, unmistakably.

"If we're going to continue dancing around this then I'd at least appreciate a straight answer."

"Then you have agreed to dance," Hannibal stated, not asked.

"I haven't agreed to *any*thing," he said tightly.

"Will."

The compelling tone forced his feet to turn. Will found Hannibal standing a few feet behind him, watching him sleekly. He felt the need to back up against the counter but resisted, his irritation and disquiet and impatience with the whole evening coming to a head.

"What?" he bit out.

"I no longer wish to be your psychiatrist," Hannibal said.

A slap to the face would have been less surprising. Will felt his face fall and his lips part, a frown marring his forehead. Hannibal's calm expression did not waver.

"You want to...why?" was all he could muster.

If he had known it would happen, he would wonder later, would he have stopped it then? Hannibal was not overly swift in his movements, more determinedly precise, giving Will just enough time to do as his instincts had been urging. He backed up as Lecter moved gracefully forwards, a hand placed on the counter to Will's left, the other reaching up to slide around the base of his neck, holding him still. Will grabbed at Lecter's immaculate dinner jacket with his right, his breath heaving into his lungs as the other man leaned forwards and pressed their lips together. His left hand fumbled, fingers finding others on the counter, curling around

them and digging in. Softly and smoothly, Hannibal parted his lips with his tongue and a building energy that caused friction. Will wondered for a delirious moment if this was even happening. His heart was beating rapidly in his chest. *Perhaps he hadn't even left the house at all*. The hairs on his arms rose to thorns, pricking at his skin. *Maybe he'd fallen asleep and this was all an elaborate dream*. Hannibal's hand descended his back, pulling their bodies flush, tipping his head slightly to the right so as to deepen their contact. Will felt his larynx vibrate in an involuntary sound of approval. No, he thought in a slow, hazy panic, no this is definitely real.

There wasn't much room to pull back but Will found it. Hannibal did not pursue his retreating lips, instead leaning back himself and giving Will a little room. Little being the operative word as Lecter kept him crowded against the counter. Will kept his eyes focused on Lecter's maroon tie knot, taking a steadying breath and trying to understand why he was less disturbed by what had just occurred than he thought he should be.

"Because, dear Will," Hannibal said; Will could see his lips move at the top of his field of vision, "If I were still your psychiatrist I would have felt terribly conflicted about what I just did, and I do not like to feel conflicted. I prefer a philosophy of no regrets."

"And if there were regrets now?" Will asked, looking to the left and keeping his eyes fixed on the open doorway.

"I believe they would be yours," Hannibal said, "as I have none."

Will stood, quiet and shaken, as Hannibal slid the fingers of his right hand down from Will's ear to his chin, his thumb creeping out to move smoothly across his bottom lip. Then, with a suddenness that left him feeling chill, Lecter moved away, leaving the kitchen with feathers unruffled and a calmness in his step that Will could not emulate.

He stared at the glasses upon the opposite counter and listened to the parrots squawk from the next room, oblivious.

The corridor was long and dark, lit harsh in cold pink from one side, warm blue the other. The wall he was facing thrummed with a heartbeat, steady, thump, thump, thump*. It was hot, stifling; an enclosing, suffocating heat. His legs moved but not in an expected fashion. Instead, Will took a confident step backwards, again and again, creating an undulating wave of fluid reverse, limbs angular and alien in their movements.*

His head swung to the left to an open doorway, caught in the corner of an eye. He thought he saw a frozen beach, the waters icy, the totem high against the grey sky, but it closed softly, a delicate hand keeping the innards from view. A slow, preternatural moan lifted from the floor as he continued on, reminiscent of a stag's bray at dusk. A swing to the right and he saw the cabin in the woods, puddles on the porch chairs, before that door too was shut, slam. The corridor began to widen and the colours faded. His wandering feet continued on until they began to crunch against the ground, snow crystals and ice, naked trees dressed in black filtering in around him. His breath puffed back into his mouth as inhaled smoke. The tree branches shivered in a wind blown backwards, shaking like dancer's legs. The corridor regressed until it was only a hanging picture frame upon the darkness.

His journey halted not as he hit the solidness against his back but, he felt, stopped as he had found his way back to it. He looked down, seeing under-lit snow beneath his feet. A pair of arms encircled him, sliding around his torso as a snake encasing a victim. Hot breath at his ear as he leaned back. The beginnings of a word.

Will awoke the morning after, starving and with the remnants of a half remembered dream clinging to his conscious mind. He made eggs because they were hot and he wanted the protein. Three, scrambled, with toast on the side. He sat on the couch with Winston curled up beside him and chewed his food, swallowing it down. He turned on his small television and listened to the adverts blare into life. Managing to wait at least until he'd finished his eggs, Will Graham stood up, walked out of his front door with Winston at his heels, ears perked, and sat down on his cold porch in his dressing gown, feet sitting down on the steps. He could hear the television jingling some merry tune in the background as he rubbed at his face with both hands, unable to scrub away the feelings residing there.

Soft fur curled against his side and Will reached out, putting his arm up across the dog's back and scratching at his neck with absent fingers. He felt like he was sitting in a hole of his own digging, looking up at the sky and waiting for someone, anyone, to come and pull him out. No one to pull you out but yourself, he thought morosely. Why can't I see this clearly? He had tried to rationalise it.

Driving Alana home the night before he had been quiet but not enough to arouse a comment. Then he had kissed her goodnight. She had given him a soft smile and hands against his chest, pushing softly. Her eyes had said '*not now* '; not the finality he'd expected, or the utter rejection he'd needed. As he walked back to the car and heard her front door close behind him he started to wonder why he'd done it at all. He had felt guilty, as if he was performing some sort of betrayal. The cold road rumbled beneath him, pooling headlights stretching out across the rushing tarmac. It took longer than usual to ferret out his reasoning.

Hannibal did not want to be his psychiatrist. He wanted something that Will wasn't sure he could give.

Kissing Alana had been a jumpstart, an in-his-face truth. He'd needed to see, he'd needed to understand the motivation behind Lecter's calm, concentrated kiss and tender caress. Because he had wanted to understand the feeling that he thought he might have misplaced. Something about Hannibal bit at him, told him it was hiding and dared him to unearth it, with a soft smile and calculating eyes. He'd already seen the attraction there, been blind to it for long enough, so close to it that he'd missed the signs which, in retrospect, should have been obvious to him. Only Will had been more comfortable playing, *dancing*, with his eyes on his work and Hannibal as his rock. Happy enough until he was forced to face his own wants, his own reactions, his own desire. The ball had always been in the other court; now it had rolled to his feet and stopped.

Will picked it up and pocketed it.

They were standing in the lab at nine fifteen, Will, Beverly to his right, Zeller to his left, Price before them with a sheet of acetate on an under-lit table projecting onto the ceiling, when the beeps swept through like a wave. They all checked their phones as they walked, already knowing where they would need to be. Their feet had hurried as they realised the urgency in the message.

"We've got a live one," Jack said as they bundled down to the car park, syncopated footsteps tapping as they ran for the SUVs, "found twenty minutes ago, critical condition. Beverly, take Brian and Jimmy over to the Peabody Library, Sergeant Ackles will meet you there. Will, you're with me."

"How long do we have?" Will asked, hurrying inside.

"Doc doesn't know," Crawford said as he clicked his seatbelt, "probably not long enough."

"Is it the Ripper?" Will couldn't stand to not know what he would be walking into.

"No," Jack said, putting his foot down and lurching them into reverse, "it's the Copycat. Someone carved a smile a mile wide into our vic's face. We'll have to see what we can get, if anything."

All the way through the drive to the hospital Will felt sick at his thoughts. The first that had sprung to mind as Jack had said the killer's nickname; how had he elevated Georgia's amateur work? Will bit at his cheek and compelled a visceral image of Beth LeBeau into his mind's eye. The stench of blood followed. He forced it to sicken him until it was difficult to be interested in the artistry. Jack gunned the engine even as Will knew there would be no chance of anything left that the Copycat hadn't wanted to leave. He was too careful for that.

"He's in no condition to talk," the doctor was a tall woman with droopy cheeks and straw blonde hair, eyes that did not seem easily shocked by horror but haunted by what they had seen today.

"I understand your concern for your patient," Jack said as Will stared through the small window into the short, stubby room in the ICU, a heavily bandaged figure laying on the bed, "but this is a critical..."

"You don't understand, agent Crawford," she said, picking up two sets of clipboards from the small table next to her, "his jaw muscles have been severed and his tongue has been removed. This guy isn't going to do any talking. The most we can do is keep him comfortable until he goes, which won't be long. I'm surprised he even made it this far."

The sigh of frustration Jack gave was entirely self-centred and Will tried to adopt that ethos. It never worked but he tried nonetheless.

"Can I just..?" Will started just as the flatline rang out.

They watched, helpless, as the doctor called the crash-cart and they tried, futilely, to bring back what was left of a man with no life left in him. Will watched and balled his fists. This is what he is, he thought to himself, this is what he does. He left him alive for a reason. Did he

want us to see this? Or did he want to see it? He would want to see it. He'd like to watch them scurry like ants to save the stuck pig, bandaged on his bed. Will blinked and looked away, swallowing as he put his back to the wall, keeping the view of the room from his eyes.

"I need to see where it happened," he said to Jack as they listened to the doctor pronounce time of death.

"Right," Jack nodded, eyes alight with frustration, "let's not waste time here."

They left, Jack phoning the coroner who had followed behind them in another car. The body would be back at Quantico when they returned. Right now the black rabbit was forming in his mind. Will needed to follow it down the rabbit hole while its image was fresh.

A ten minute journey back up roads they had raced down before, their pace significantly slower, until they crossed over the motorway, the basilica standing below them like an Athenian temple. Jack was tight with anger, Will could feel it. The road made him think of a narrow corridor as they drove towards the Washington monument. He began to wonder if he was going backwards. Jack took a hard right and parked behind the SUV Beverly and the others had taken and two BPD patrol cars, jerking up the handbrake.

The George Peabody library was a known tourist attraction and function suite, perhaps lesser known for its immense collection than for its stark architecture. People liked to get married there dancing on the marble floors. Will had visited once and couldn't find it in him to appreciate the neo-Grec style. He found the room gave him a nauseating sense of inverse vertigo. The repeated pattern of floor upon floor, staring out like outdoor windows indoors, rising up and up; it made his eyes blur. He kept his gaze level with the ground floor and followed Jack's grey clad back into the east wing.

The pool of blood on the floor beneath a plain, wooden chair was incongruous not only within its setting but also in its singularity. No other trace of trauma was visible in the austere room, books in row upon row along the walls, the black and white floor shining in the golden light of the fixtures. Sergeant Ackles, a short, stumpy man with a greying, bushy moustache, was talking to Beverly while Zeller and Price busied in their work. Jack headed straight to the talking pair while Will stood, rooted to the spot, and tried his best to breathe in whatever was left of the smoky rabbit's trail, disturbed by the dozen feet that had trampled through. He heard voices but was too focused on his own thoughts, walking out slowly into the vaulting room, his footsteps echoing slightly. He looked down at the crimson pool, a skin of light forming as he walked past. Will looked up to find Beverly watching him with a slight frown, obviously repeating what she had been saying while his ears had been deaf to her words.

"Hey, Will," she said, "are you ok?"

"Pictures," he said, not wasting time with an answer, "does anyone have pictures of the body?"

"We didn't get any," Ackles said, his gruff voice alight with distaste, "Donaldson and Geats were the first on the scene and the paramedics were the first thing they called."

"Great," Will said to himself, cursing that they hadn't been called first.

"The man was still alive for christ's sake," Ackles bit out, "we didn't have time to haul out the cameras."

"It is imperative that we get a reconstruction of this crime scene, sergeant," Jack was better at police relations than Will, even if he still kept the authoritative tone in his voice.

"Donaldson, Geats, I need to speak to one of them," Will said bluntly.

"Geats is back at the station with the curator, she found the body," Ackles said, "Donaldson's out front. Was pretty green around the gills when we arrived. Sent him out to get some air."

When he was brought in, Will could agree that the officer didn't look well. He was young, maybe early twenties, breathing steadily through his mouth. Will looked back to the floor, kept his eyes on the blood as he talked.

"Donaldson?" he asked, just to get the man's attention.

"Yes, sir," Donaldson nodded.

"Your sergeant tells me you were the first responder," Will said; Donaldson nodded quickly, "Alright. I need you to talk me through exactly what you found. Don't leave anything out, even if it seems trivial, alright?"

"Yeah," Donaldson said, wetting his lips and swallowing, "ok. We...we got a call for a four nineteen about eight fifty. Me and my partner responded, the woman on the phone didn't give much information. Front door was open when we arrived at eight fifty eight but the library doesn't open till nine. At first I thought it was some sorta hoax because there was nobody around. Then we found the curator and she was pretty damn shaken up. Geats took her aside while he sent me to scout ahead. I came in here first and..."

Donaldson stopped, clearing his throat and taking a swallow. Will waited patiently. The man's disgust and fear was only making the rabbit clearer.

"The vic was seated on that chair," Donaldson pointed to it hurriedly before lowering his hand, "when I realised he was still alive I called for the paramedics and we waited till they showed..."

"Wait, describe him to me," Will said, interrupting.

"I..." Donaldson wetted his lips again and his voice wavered on the first syllable as he continued, "his face was cut open. I mean right open."

"Can you show me?" Will asked, "Point to your face, tell me where."

"About," Donaldson blinked in rapid succession, lifting his index fingers to point above the top of his jaw, half way between his ears and eyes, "here. And he was breathing, real shallow but he was breathing. And he had a piece of paper in his...mouth," Donaldson said the word as if it was the closest approximation he could make of the mutilated hole left in the vic's face, "I didn't touch it but the paramedics pulled it out."

"Who has it?" Will asked the room; Zeller walked towards him holding an evidence bag. Will took it and looked inside at the badly blood stained sheet, torn diagonally from a book by the looks of the ragged edge. He was more than aware that the room was watching him with mixed reactions. He could feel Ackles dislike from seven paces. He turned to Donaldson, flicking his eyes as close to contact as they would get, "thank you."

The man left and Ackles went with him, after another few words with Jack. Will looked at the sheet, reading what little he could.

...gone closer. But, at that moment, men brought forward Sinon, whom they had found hiding near the river.

'Alas!' Sinon wept, trembling. 'I wish that I were dead! I have been accused of crimes I did not commit. I would have been killed if I did not escape.'

Will scanned what little else he could catch from the page, frowning. He recognised the names.

"*The Iliad*," Will said to himself, looking back up to the pool of blood, "why are you getting personal with this one? Who was he?". The Copycat elevated, not connected. He didn't see his victims as worthy of special treatment; they were simply material, clay with which to sculpt. So who is this for, this memento?

"He was the night watchman," Zeller said, answering Will's rhetorical question, "David Bressinden, worked here for five years..."

"What did you say?" Will interrupted, his mind whiplashing as he looked to Zeller.

"He was the security guard," Zeller said, frowning slightly at Will's abrupt tone, "his name was David Bressinden."

"But I..." Will shook his head, "I know him."

"You know him?" Jack frowned, walking to Will purposefully, "How?"

"He was my roommate, first year of the Academy," Will said as if reciting from a book, trying to connect his suddenly scattered thoughts, "dropped out after five months."

"Excuse me, Agent Crawford," Ackles voice suddenly sounded from his left; Will looked at him, startled that he hadn't heard him approach, "there's a woman out front asking for you."

"By name?" Jack frowned, "Did she give you hers?"

"Freddie Lounds," Ackles said; Will felt his hackles rise.

"Christ, how did she hear about it this fast?" Zeller said, shaking his head.

"I don't want her in here, near here, within a hundred yards of this crime scene, sergeant," Jack said with cold precision.

"She said she has info on your vic," the sergeant said, giving Will a look that would have turned milk.

"*Sure* she does," Will shook his head, his lips twisting wryly.

"I'll handle this," Jack said to Will, lifting a placating hand, before following Ackles back outside.

There was a short silence before the footsteps against marble started up again, followed by the flash of a camera and the rustle of a plastic evidence bag. Will turned back to the scene. It was coloured now by his association, he knew it was. This was the first time he'd dealt with the murder of someone he knew, even if only briefly. Will found his own memories of the victim blurring in with his attempted reconstruction. He stopped, shaking his head and ceasing in his efforts. He needed silence and solitude to work. Waiting was just as bad as trying and failing but he didn't want to interrupt the others in their process of collection and documentation. He would need the shots later to keep the image fresh.

The approaching footsteps spoke of only one set of feet. Will kept one arm folded over his chest, the other bent, elbow against the opposite hand, so he could bite at his thumbnail. Jack stopped next to him and Will waited for the man to order the scene cleared. Instead, Jack tapped his arm and led him to the side and, after a moment's pause, said something else entirely.

"Will, where were you last night?"

Will looked at him, frowning as Jack watched him closely. He kept his voice down on instinct and let his mind race at the implications.

"You know where I was last night," Will said slowly, "I was at Hannibal's dinner. Why are you asking that?"

"I mean between eleven thirty last night and eight thirty this morning," Jack said, not explaining himself.

"Jack..." he started, only to be interrupted.

"Did you know that David Bressinden was Lounds' contact?" he asked.

"Contact for what?" Will asked, agitated.

"For the article she wrote on you," Jack said.

"No," Will said emphatically, "I didn't. Are you accusing me of this?"

"I'm just making sure you have a good, solid alibi because Freddie is out front and she sure as hell wants to paint you as the killer," Jack explained, "said Bressinden told her he was being threatened and was worried it was you."

"Well I can't give you one," Will said, wishing he could; this is ludicrous, he thought, "I went home, I walked the dogs, I went to sleep and I came in to work. I don't know what else to tell

you other than I didn't do this, Jack. You know I didn't."

"Alright," Jack said, nodding, "we'll keep with this. Don't worry."

"Why would I need to worry?" he asked wryly, looking to Zeller as he took a sample of the blood, Price as he checked for footprints around the chair, "Aren't you going to clear the scene? I can't work with all this noise."

"I think it's better we go over it for now," Jack said; Will snapped his head to the left to look at him, "right now you're involved with the victim and you've been implicated by a third party, I can't have you here."

"Involved with the victim?" Will said incredulously, "Jack I haven't even seen the guy for six *years*. I spent last night in my bed waking up every couple of hours because," *because you couldn't stop thinking about Lecter*, "I have nightmares about this damn job and you're kicking me to the kerb *now*? I need to look at this scene or you know what will..."

"Not now," Jack said tightly as Will pulled his lips in, rubbing them together, "later. I need this cleared up before any more dirt sticks to this investigation, understand?"

There was a terse twenty seconds where Will didn't answer, looking away, hands loosely on his hips. He felt his lips twitch into a semblance of a pained smile. This was bullshit and Jack knew it, he was just worried after having to explain him again and again to Purnell as she sniffed around their unit like a hyena, waiting for the weaknesses to show. So he'd play along, for now. He didn't have much choice. What stung the most was not the accusations, Freddie was vindictive, or the lack of support, Jack was under pressure.

What stung the most was watching the smoky rabbit twitch its ears and bound across the blood, leaving no footprints as it disappeared behind the bookshelves. Will left and took the SUV back to Quantico, his fists tight around the wheel.

The waiting room seemed lighter somehow, not quite so grey as usual. Will wondered if it was his imagination or whether his eyes were simply too sensitive after his lack of sleep. He tried to ask himself what he was doing here but the question was merely met with his own derision. He knew why he was here and there was no reason to deny himself the acceptance of that fact. He had enough shit to deal with without his own coming into the mix.

When the door opened Hannibal was putting on his coat over his suit jacket. Looking up he registered slight surprise in Lecter's eyes; a minute raising of his eyebrows and a stilling of his movements. Without a word Hannibal reversed his movements and placed the coat back over his arm.

"This is an unexpected surprise," he said as Will walked inside, Lecter holding the door for him, "I assumed I would not be seeing you for a while."

"I thought you never made assumptions," Will said, taking off his jacket and hanging it on the coat stand.

"I tend to shy from them," Lecter corrected, "I prefer facts, they build better foundations. Perhaps you would provide some to enlighten me."

Many words clambered to leave his mouth. Will picked the safe ones because the others snarled at him, made his eyes blink.

"Well, somehow, for a day, I was turned into a murder suspect, not even sure if I'm still not on the list," Will said, tripping over his words in his rush to speak, fill the silence; when he looked to Hannibal the man was watching him carefully, "the Copycat left another victim for us. This one was alive, not for long but he was alive. There was something different about this one though, something new, I..."

"Will, please," Hannibal said; Will looked to him, closing his mouth, "I understand your want to discuss this case but, as I made it clear, I cannot continue as your psychiatrist," Will clenched his hands and bit at the inside of his cheek, "I feel it would be unprofessional and exploitative. I have many colleagues whom you may pass on to Jack Crawford, all very capable."

A long drawn in breath was all Will could give as a reply; when it was released his rigid form deflated slightly, leaving his shoulders a little slumped, his back caved, his hands loose. He turned to look at Hannibal who was watching him with distinct curiosity. Will refused to beat around the bush. It spoke too much of the bureaucracy that always held him back, at work, and emotional bureaucracy, his relationships suffered, his friends withered. The last thing he wanted, in that moment, was to lose this.

"I want you to continue as my psychiatrist," Will said, making Hannibal narrow his eyes and open his mouth; Will cut him off, "unofficial psychiatrists can't be unprofessional, can they?"

Lecter hesitated, taking a breath and letting it out as he walked to his desk, looking down at the half finished pencil etching there.

"Perhaps not," he said.

"Then we go back to the way it was before everything, when it was just you and me," Will suggested, "just talking, no contracts."

"If that is what you wish," Hannibal said; Will felt like grinding his teeth. The man was so very passive when he wanted to be.

"But..."

"Yes, Will?" Hannibal prompted when Will hesitated.

"But I want to ask a favour of you."

"If it is something I can provide," Hannibal said, placing his coat over the back of the armchair in which Will normally sat.

"I want you to..." Will cleared his throat, feeling foolish and flushed all at once, "I want you to kiss me again."

"That may be..." Hannibal began but Will stopped him with a single word, his eyes closed and his head tipped forwards slightly.

"Please."

He was right. Knowing it was going to happen somehow made it more unbearable. He opened his eyes because he needed to see it. Hannibal pursed his lips slightly, looking at his desk once more. After a brief silence he lifted his head, seeming to come to some sort of agreement with himself. He walked towards Will slowly, hands reaching up to take him by the waist, leaving only a provokingly slim space between their bodies. Will's hands automatically jumped to Hannibal's elbows, feeling cool cotton beneath his palms.

"You ask this of me as one who needs reassurance that what he feels is true," Lecter said, making Will wet his lips and feel the need to explain himself; only he couldn't work the words past the knot in his throat. He looked up at Hannibal, trying to slow his quickening breath, "then perhaps it should be I asking a favour of you, dear Will."

"What?" Will asked softly, frowning.

"Perhaps I should be asking you to reassure your own fears," Hannibal said, "I have already made peace with my feelings, I need no comfort. Perhaps I should be asking *you* to kiss me."

"Do you really need to analyse me while I'm trying to..." Will floundered; what the hell *am* I trying to do here? he thought wildly.

"Then this could be..." Lecter started, his eyes locking with Will's.

"Oh for god's sake," Will breathed out, leaning upwards ever so slightly to capture those talking lips before Hannibal could continue.

Lecter stiffened momentarily before relaxing into the embrace, his arms slipping around Will's lithe back in order to pull him closer, press them together tightly. Will's arms slid up as Hannibal leaned forwards, looping around his neck as his back arched at the increased angle. He clasped his fingers to stop them shaking. The feelings rushing across his skin and coursing through his blood were very familiar, incredibly familiar. He felt transported back to the night of the feast, that same adrenaline, that same prickling of the skin, that same shortness of breath; the same unmistakable, livid, tearing attraction. Head tipped to the side by long, sure fingers, Will felt Lecter slide inside his mouth. He shivered, pulling closer. Hot breath against his face. The underlying energy there, the fervour beneath that stoic shell, spoke to him in the way Hannibal's fingers dug into his shirt, tightened to his flesh like a vice. Hips pressed against each other, arms against neck against chest against hips. For a breathless moment he couldn't tell where Hannibal began and he ended. Or who was the first to pull back.

A gap barely big enough for a scalpel to slide hovered between them. Hannibal's mouth brushed Will's cheekbone while Will's breathed just below his chin. He found he was clinging to Hannibal like he feared he might fall, or the man might leave.

"You're trembling," Hannibal said softly.

"I'm just..." *I don't know*, Will thought.

"Are you happy?" Hannibal asked him, a terribly serious sincerity to his voice that made Will lick his lips and wonder; *was he*? "Is this truly what you want?"

"...Yes," he said, leaning back a little so as to see the other man's eyes; deep maroon that seemed to burn with an inner umber, flecks from the iris that caught the light as they watched him.

A smile that moved every muscle from the tips of Hannibal's lips to the corner of his eyes. Will didn't think he would ever know how he had missed the love that Hannibal had been harbouring for him all this time.

"And you have no idea what that means to me," Hannibal said, tracing the curve of Will's neck to his shoulder with a gentle finger, "you might never know."

"Then explain it to me until I do," Will said quietly, allowing the happiness he'd been missing to swallow him whole.

He leaned into the kiss and time stopped as they stood by the desk in Hannibal's office, wrapped in each other while the world drifted by outside the window

Aigre-Doux

Chapter Notes

Title translation: 'Aigre-Doux' - 'Bittersweet'

He warmed up easily and too quickly. Heart attachments strung together with familiar hands pulling the stray strings neater; now the two halfs had been drawn tight. Will felt he would have to set about cutting the stray ends loose, *guilt, doubt, resentment*; needs be everything would be shed, in time.

A quintessence of want and desire laid itself over his mind and body like a shroud; a desire that had stitched its design into his life. A pattern of thought had been broken, and the agitated, darkened, gloom had shifted; a red rollercoaster of bloody grins and mortal wounds. Hannibal had taken hold of him and refused to let go until Will was whole again. When he thought about it, it was almost too much for him to process. He was so used to caring for others that someone caring about him was a rare novelty. Lecter had saved his shattered life and now he was picking up the pieces and slowly reassembling them.

It was not that Will couldn't make sense of it, the still underlying current of violence and hate that ran through him, but more that in those few days he did not want to. He was not yet sure what form the darkness would take when it settled but, at that moment, all he desired was to feel wanted.

Will Graham opened his eyes and observed the side of a leg stretching out before him, brown cotton soft against his cheek. He felt hazy, blinking his eyes slowly as he began to remember sitting down on the couch, entwined, shifting into a recline, closing his eyes. It wasn't very clear.

There was a hand in his hair. A thumb brushing back and forth across the nape of his neck. He felt like closing his eyes again as the fingers contracted tenderly, fingertips brushing against his scalp and twisting through curls. Slowly he lifted a lethargic right arm up towards his face, blinking at the watch readout as it came into focus, and frowned.

"Damn," he said softly as he heard a page turn, "it's nearly six. I should be home by now."

Rolling onto his back caused the hand to move, sliding across his shoulder as he turned and down over his chest as he settled. Will allowed his eyes to take in the ceiling, the left hand side of Lecter's head and shoulder just visible. The hand on his chest flattened, thumb against the open v of skin where his top button was undone. He felt the pressure there as he took a deep breath in, letting it trickle out slowly as he rolled his head to the right and craned his neck backwards.

“Allow me to drive you,” Hannibal said as Will viewed him upside-down; Lecter moved only his eyes from the book he held in his left hand in order to look down at him.

“You don’t need to do that,” Will said, bringing his hand up to stifle a yawn. He sat up rather reluctantly, feeling the hand retract, down his torso and around his side. He jerked as fingers passed over a ticklish spot, “I’m pretty sure I’ve used up my quota of hospitality.”

“I was not informed there was a limit,” Hannibal’s voice was tinted enticingly with rare humour.

“I’m not that tired.”

“Then that makes two of us, yet between us I would say you have been treated to the rougher day.”

“Not anything unusual,” Will said, shrugging his shoulders lightly, even if his words were a horrendous understatement, “I’m left ragged most sundowns.”

“And I am certain that can be avoided, if only you would let others help you. Allow me to drive you home, Will. I insist.”

The day had been rough, yes he would agree with that. Jack’s reaction had been a stark reminder of how close to the edge everyone believed him to be. The swiftness with which he was pulled from the investigation had been disorienting. One minute he was stepping into the skin of a killer, through the looking glass of his thoughts, and the next he was believed to have stepped too far inside. He had returned to Quantico and, truthfully, not known what to do with himself. Half an hour was spent pulling out all the files he had on the Copycat, spreading the photographs out over his desk. Soon he began to resent the limited space, the inability to put all the photographs down at once. Marissa Schurr’s patch seemed dark and brooding by those of Cassie Boyle’s body, wide open to the sky and shining in the sun. They sat as if presiding over snapshots of the Totem, all greys and blacks, profligate limbs bunched and shed; over the rising figure of the Angel, praying for his own black soul. There were strings, Will knew, strings pulling them all together only he couldn’t see them, so thin and pale were they.

His resentment only grew when he realised he had no pictures of Bressinden to add to the growing mosaic. *Should you care more than this*, he bit at himself, *shouldn’t you grieve even a little, as a normal person would?* Bressinden had slipped neatly into the category of puzzle piece, bypassing old acquaintance other than for the few seconds in which Will had recognised his name. Will knew how far he’d stepped and it *was* too far, just not in the way the higher ups had thought.

Now he couldn’t even see the body, see through the Copycat’s eyes as he laid out his task. He hadn’t been allowed to see, hadn’t been worthy-minded enough as far as the F.B.I. were concerned. Didn’t pass the screening but was useful enough to haul in whenever they needed a bloodhound to track down the undesirables. Will had felt distinctly disposable as he had stood in his office, unable to vent his frustration. The photographs had ended up strewn to the floor with one sweep of his arm; leaves falling from autumn trees. He had closed the blinds

of his small office while he retrieved them and piled them carefully. The last thing he wanted was for others to see what his bare anger could become.

Then a knock had come at his door and Will had been led to one of the interrogation rooms. He hadn't appreciated the location, designed, he was sure, to make him ill at ease enough to slip up if he were hiding anything. The woman who took his statement was a stranger, *I need to know every step you took between leaving Quantico on Thursday evening and eight thirty this morning*, with a harsh but controlled voice which made Will's fingers clench. He felt like telling her he'd lain awake until two a.m. struggling over whether or not he wanted to fuck his incredibly attractive psychiatrist, only he expected the truth wouldn't be welcome. He had gone through his night and morning outlining everything in detail, and watched as the readout on the digital recorder ticked forwards. A legitimate enough reason, he had thought, not to make eye contact with the harpy across the table from him.

As if not enough that he'd been essentially put through the wringer, as Will had left the GenCrim department he was afforded an open display of Purnell, Hatcher and Crawford walking slowly by the end of the corridor, flashing into view and then flashing out again. Will had bit at the inside of his lip and forced himself not to break the skin as he shoved his balled fists into his pockets. Explaining me away again, are we? He thought bitterly. Or maybe it's gone too far this time. Maybe Jack's running out of excuses.

Only holding on by the strength of his own conviction had he visited Lecter's office. Truthfully he had known why but he had lied in order to get himself there. There hadn't been enough diplomacy or excuses to talk himself out of it; the day had stripped him of that. He told himself it was to talk about the case he was no longer involved in, told himself he was feeling a tad unstable and needed the support. Both not strict lies but not the reason. *The reason*. He had known exactly why he was there, only compounded by his rushing want to ask for the thing which had inexorably drawn him back. Their second kiss had become more of an embrace than the first. The frustration and pain and anger and *need to know* had sagged out of his body with every second that ticked by as Hannibal Lecter held him close as if it were the most expected outcome. Will knew he was lost as soon as their mouths had met.

Then explain it to me until I do

Lecter had appeared to be quite capable of doing so. He couldn't truly remember if Hannibal had led him to the couch or they had naturally progressed there. They had kissed as if it were the only way to keep breathing. Will felt messy in comparison to Hannibal's strict, deep seated control, hands moving to exactly where they needed to be, his head tilted at just the correct angle in order to deepen their contact. Yet, as Will fell into the abyss he'd been hovering over reluctantly for weeks now, he could feel the undercurrent running at its depths; a deep, primal desire that fed a feeling of pure animalism hiding beneath a stoic shell. It shuttered to the surface in the almost bruising grip Hannibal had of his arm, or the forcefulness with which he had pressed him against the couch.

The memory made him feel hot inside as they pulled out into traffic. He wasn't even sure why he'd agreed in the end but something about it was comfortable, him sitting in the unfamiliar feel of passenger seat of his own car, Hannibal seeming oddly out place behind the wheel of the older model and not the matching sleek beauty of the Bentley. Will found it

difficult to care, as he was sure he should by now, that his life appeared to have tipped in the exact direction he'd been actively avoiding. In truth it was a simple pleasure just to have someone with whom he could be utterly silent and yet, somehow, say everything that was needed.

"I did warn you."

Winston sat three feet from the couch, eyes steady, large, tail flat against the ground, unmoving. Will was sure that he was the only dog he'd come across who showed his resentment by way of mournfulness. The dog's eyes couldn't have been any bigger if he'd tried. Lecter, Will was glad, seemed more curious as to the dog's behaviour than aggravated. It always aggravated Will, receiving the silent treatment. Without fail he would cave and end up with his hand in a bag of treats and Winston back on the couch beside him, curled up and happy as he crunched on whatever Will had been blackmailed into fetching.

"He appears to know exactly why you have been absent," Lecter said, sitting forwards and gently extending his hand towards the dog; Winston studiously ignored it, "odd behaviour. I've heard it said that dogs can scent out potential rivals, yet I have never seen it in practice."

"Well," Will said as he put his hands loosely on his hips, "feel free to indulge your curiosity doctor. I'm sure he can keep this up all night. *Winston*."

The dog didn't even flinch at his name, the most reaction being a flicker of his shaggy left ear. Will shook his head and walked through the open door to the small kitchen area, bending down to retrieve a bag, the rustle of which brought many eager paws clattering across the floor. Will was followed back into the living room by a small herd, all heads held high, dancing on their paws as they made to be at the front. On seeing the bag Winston finally looked up.

"Here," Will said, unable to hide his amusement as Hannibal took the bright green bag of Merrick's lamb lung fillets he was handed, staring at the garish packaging, "your penance. But don't give any to this one," he said, reaching down to ruffle Lady's curly white hair, "she can't have too much salt. I'll get us something to drink."

It may have made for an amusing image, Will thought as he opened and closed cupboards, tapping his fingers against the wood while he surveyed the contents, but he knew it was just a nice distraction. Once they had reached his ship on the sea and Hannibal had jerked the creaky handbrake tight Will had been forced to focus on the reality of his situation and stop swimming around in the light headed fantasy it presented. Lecter had invited himself inside, in essence, and Will hadn't stopped him. Now, however, he felt the pressure of the man's presence as if it were some sort of test. Ravaging the cupboards wouldn't produce some hidden luxurious pâté or excellent wine; just the same old dry pasta, tins of peaches, crab paste and cheap beer. For the second time that day Will found himself feeling entirely inadequate to deal with his situation. Being a guest at Lecter's grand house, with its infinite bounty of fine fare, had made him complacent to the idea of impressing the man in any way. He sighed and began to wonder why he even felt that he needed to.

He hunkered down and opened a small cupboard to the left of the sink where he kept any gifts that were rarely, if ever, opened. A bottle of red wine Alana had given him for Christmas, a box of cigars that Jack had given him on his birthday last year which Will hadn't had the heart to tell him he would never smoke, a fish shaped bottle opener that his classmate Sandra Rhodes had given him in third year, still in its packaging. Will took a breath, grabbing the red wine from the back of the cupboard and turning it around in his hands as he looked at the label. It appeared to be nice, he thought, feeling a little out of his depth. He was sure he could trust Alana's taste at least, even after the non-alcoholic wine.

Yet, his ability to make Hannibal comfortable in his home would not be the only test. Will licked his lips with a small twinge of cowardly guilt. I can't just ask, can I, he thought derisively. Thirty seven years old on your next birthday Will Graham and you tiptoe around this like an elephant around a mouse. He snagged two wine glasses from his small collection, a corkscrew and stuck his hand in a tin by the sink, laden fingers awkwardly picking up a bone shaped treat, before returning to the living room. He stopped in the doorway.

"For crying out loud," Will couldn't help but smile, shaking his head, and his anxiety was flicked aside momentarily as he simply stood and observed.

A row of perfect order, each dog sitting to attention in the middle of the room, gazes intent on the man who stood above them watching each wide eyed face in turn. Lecter extended his hand, bending down slightly, a dry treat between finger and thumb. Lenny made to lunge forwards, jaws wide.

"*Ah*," Lecter warned; the dog retreated, licking his mouth hungrily and moving on his paws. Yet he stayed still as a statue until the treat was in reach, taking it gently before wolfing it down. Hannibal stood up straight, a satisfied look on his face, "these truly are exceptionally well trained animals. I am impressed."

"So am I, " Will said wryly, "they sure as hell don't do that for me. Hey, Lady," he whistled and the small dog danced away from the line as Will sat down on the couch, putting the bottle, glasses and corkscrew down on the low coffee table. The small dog tried to jump up on the couch and, while Will would have happily let her any other time, tonight he was going to try his best not to have Hannibal leave his house covered in a fine coating of dog hair. He motioned for her to sit and gave her the medicated treat, watching her fondly as she crunched it in half, sniffing around the floor to find the remnants.

The packet was placed onto the top of the tallest thing in the room, that being Will's CD rack, and the dogs looked mournful. They slowly dispersed back to their usual haunts. Hannibal stopped, his right hand reaching out to delicately run down the long length of plastic cases. Will couldn't help but admire the man's tall figure; with his coat and jacket hanging in the hallway Will was free to watch the subtle way in which Lecter's waistcoat drew in the shape of his frame, powerful chest down into narrow waist, further down into slim hips...

"You have eclectic taste in music," he observed as Will furiously twisted the corkscrew and stared intently at the table, "Beck, Gershwin, Muddy Waters. Ah, Bach. Harpsichord concertos three to five. I ought to lend you the full collection. Quite exquisite."

“I think I might have the full works already,” Will said distractedly as he pushed down the legs of the corkscrew, “if I’m going to be honest I’ve never been that thrilled by the harpsichord.”

“Then I am sure you have simply not been given a thrilling experience,” Hannibal said, looking the CD as he removed it from the rack, “it is a subtle taste contained within brash notes. I feel the harpsichord has the ability to transmit its pleasure directly into the listener, sometimes mistaken for brash, not unlike the violin. Remind me to play you something the next time you visit.”

“You have a harpsichord?” Will said, not sure why he should possibly be surprised by the fact; Lecter appeared so rich to him it wouldn’t surprise Will to find out he had a private jet.

“And a piano,” Lecter said, replacing the CD, “in the sitting room upstairs.”

“I’ve never been,” Will said wryly, as if he were talking of a holiday destination, “just how many rooms does your house have?”

“Indignance does not become you, Will,” Hannibal said, “but if you wish to know it is twelve. Thirteen if you include the utility room in the basement.”

“It’s not indignance,” Will countered with a dry smile, “just good old fashioned resentment. I’m the down home little poor boy, remember? I’m not supposed to socialise with my betters.”

“I hear your father’s words,” Hannibal said, cocking his head slightly as he was wont to do while he analysed a flaw, “a classist tongue has no place in your mouth.”

He’s doing it on purpose, Will reminded himself as he cleared his throat and the cork slid from the bottle. He swore that if Hannibal slipped any more subtle innuendos about tongues and mouths towards him he’d have to address it.

“Sorry, best I’ve got,” he said, essentially stonewalling Lecter’s comment as he poured a large swill into the man’s glass, half into his own; he clocked Lecter’s dark look as Will picked up his drink, “look, it’s not much, I just need something to take the edge off, alright? The last thing I want is a re-enactment of *that* night. It’s only half a glass.”

A pause which lasted all of five seconds before Hannibal sat down beside him on the couch, reaching for his own wine before swirling it, sniffing and taking a sip. Will took a deep breath and confirmed his suspicions; positive on the wine test. Neither of them were driving anywhere tonight. As he tried to keep his head straight and consider the implications he distracted himself with humour.

“I don’t think any wine I own requires swirling,” Will half-joked.

“A good wine is a good wine, regardless of price,” Lecter said after swallowing; his tongue darted out to remove the dark sheen upon his lips, “dry, blackcurrants, oak aged but with a bitter back taste and slightly weak...merlot, southern France, two thousand and nine?”

“You read the bottle,” Will said, giving him a look.

“No need,” Hannibal said, looking inexorably pleased with himself, “the soil was rather dry that year, gave the grapes a sour hint. I have two in my cellar, different vineyard. Haven’t found anything suitable to serve them with as of yet. We should allow it to breathe.”

“You know I’m just coming to realise that you’re a terrible show off,” Will said, taking a sip of his own wine, trying and failing to extract the same information Hannibal had.

“I do try,” Hannibal said.

This time the silence was not awkward because there was nothing more to say, but because Will was sitting within his own twisted mess of a mind trying not to connect all the floating threads. He took another sip of wine and felt the need to tap his fingers, his foot, hum, anything to tease out the anxious agitation. Thankfully he managed to resist a flagrant display of nerves and being seated with Hannibal worked to his advantage. The man was apt to find the tension in any situation and deflate it, if it was in his best interests to do so.

“I believe,” he said, threading the stem of the wine glass between his middle and ring fingers, settling the bowl of the glass against his palm, “that I interrupted you earlier. You were trying to tell me about the gift the Copycat left you?”

“I’d hardly call it a gift,” Will said, taking a deep breath even as he was grateful to Lecter for offering the conversation topic. It was something he could easily lose himself in, “more a puzzle, this one.”

“How so?”

“He’s...” Will took a moment to think about his phrasing, scratching at the side of his nose, “evolving his design.”

“More brazen?”

“More brazen and more personal,” Will amended.

“For you or for him?” Hannibal asked.

“That’s...I don’t think this has anything to do with me,” Will pulled his top lip through his teeth, “I would say he’s taunting us but I don’t really know, I can’t see the full picture yet,” Hannibal was watching him and Will looked to him twice, shifting in his seat, “He left a note.”

“Hand written?” Lecter looked sceptical.

“No, not in his own words,” Will shook his head, “it was a page from *The Iliad* depicting the moment that the Trojans accept the wooden horse.”

“An interesting choice,” Lecter said, “an acceptance of a long resisted fate coupled with one of fictions most notorious liars.”

“Liars?” the word did not sit well with him, *David lied about you, that’s why Freddie thinks you did this*. No, he thought, she thinks I threatened him, which means he was being threatened. By the killer? Or does he have more dirt on him than just that which he was willing to sell to the *Tattler*. Will took a breath and wished he could get his hands on the file that was surely building on Bressinden, by photo by background check by coroner’s report.

“Sinon,” Lecter said, pulling him back to the present, “the man who slew Troy without even lifting a blade. Perhaps this man feels he is toppling an empire himself?”

“Troy is hardly an apt metaphor for the F.B.I.,” Will said, screwing up his lips, “I don’t know why he picked it. It’s more...no, I’m not thinking about the relatable context of the story, it’s more *why* he left it there. I was wrong; I thought that he might have been someone left behind, a lost soul, someone who had never had aim of their own. One without motivation. That’s why I thought he might have found inspiration in Hobbs’ kills.”

“An adoption of strategy,” Hannibal mused.

“And of vigour,” Will said, sitting forwards, elbows on his knees, rolling his wine glass between his hands, “if he had been stimulated on seeing pictures of the crimes they may have allowed his own becoming.”

“Now you do not sound so sure,” Hannibal said, encouraging.

“No,” Will said, “now I’m not. He...I don’t know, there’s a confidence to the way he kills, almost a maturity, that I didn’t see before. This evolution of the personal touch screams that. First Cassie, she was isolated, an easy dumping ground with no one around to see him. Marissa, she was more difficult, he took her back to the scene of the crime, surely knowing the house was being watched. Now, well, now he’s gone public.”

“Perhaps he is simply arrogant,” Hannibal said.

“I don’t think that’s it,” Will shook his head, “He doesn’t entirely copy those whom he emulates, he exalts them. I thought he was just another narcissistic sadist, someone without the gumption to create his own pattern, see his own desires until they were made clear by another. This latest though...” Will didn’t stop himself sounding as enthused as he felt, “he *revels* in the detail.”

“It could be that he still emulates others,” Hannibal said, relaxing down against the couch, placing his arm upon the back to steady himself as he crossed his legs, “if he began his career by copying what would have him change his ways now?”

“I’m not sure anymore. I thought he might be searching for his own culmination,” Will said, “but now I’m beginning to wonder if Cassie and Marissa were dalliances. Almost as if he was warming up.”

“For a spree?” Lecter asked.

“No, he’s too clever for that,” Will shook his head, “he’s not accelerating, he’s blossoming. I’m not sure but from how he’s progressing I think that he might not be a fledgling killer, I

think he's done this before."

When there was no comment forthcoming Will chanced a look to his right. Lecter was watching his wine with smiling lips, looking distinctly satisfied with something Will couldn't discern. The lamplight caught his chiselled features, casting his high cheekbones into almost shadow. Will looked away before he began staring and put his glass down, clasping his fingers together. Focus, he thought. Done this before, *done this before*. He let his own words echo around the arena, chewing on the inside of his lip. It was something he hadn't considered before now, not until he had started to see the links between the pairs: Cassie and Marissa, and Wells and Budish.

"Do you want to be involved?" Will muttered to himself, "Is it the design you seek to honour, or the designer?"

"Please speak up Will," Hannibal said, "I did not catch that."

"Sorry," Will said, breathing in roughly through his nose, "talking to myself. Could it be possible for a psychopath to consider the concept of sharing? Could he possess that ability?"

"Sharing is something found in preschool children, related to their often misunderstood capacity for empathy," Lecter said, "as most psychopathic personalities are created by a disturbance in the prepubescent developmental stages, normally a powerful trauma of some kind, it can be expected that the growth of such social structures as sharing, so closely related to their stunted empathy, has too been lost to them."

"So they wouldn't ever feel the need to connect with another? Not even if they recognised a similarity in their personalities?"

"A psychopath is defined by their inability to be a selfless being," Hannibal said, watching his wine and sniffing it lightly; Will watched him sip, close his eyes, and swallow, his adam's apple bobbing, "however, if they did feel a want to form a connection with another who thinks as they do it would have to be viewed in an entirely selfish light. The grand circle of their own id makes up the plain of their identifiable world. If they considered this idea of sharing it would be to no end other than to reflect their own ego or impose it. Unless, of course, this person was unlike any psychopathic personality yet recorded, then this is the only way in which I could see it as a possibility."

Nodding, Will wondered if the reason the Copycat had been so vague in his mind up until now, a shadowy figure trailing smoky rabbit tails in his wake, was because he had been looking in entirely the wrong place for his motivation. A want to be a part of the act of bringing another's design to fruition, sharing his needs. He chewed at his thumb nail before feeling slightly self conscious at the subconscious habit. He picked up his glass again and took another sip. The flavour had mellowed a touch, smoothing out the rough, bitter edge to a less jagged taste. Will wondered if his thoughts about the Copycat were following a similar pattern; a rough amateur transformed into an experienced hunter.

"Cassie Boyle's murder led me to Hobbs, gave me an insight into his motive. Almost as if it were a magnification. I'm starting to wonder if the reason I can't see him clearly is because his motives aren't as simple as I thought."

“Are a killer’s motives ever simple?” Hannibal asked.

“Sometimes,” Will offered, “sometimes I can see them clearer than I see you now. Their emotions are loud and their thoughts harsh. Others are different, like a palate that’s been run through; it smudges and everything moves out of place, difficult to tell one colour from the next. Perceptions change, motivations change. The Copycat is changing, or maybe just in my eyes,” Will put his thumb against his lips and dragged the nail across the sensitive flesh, “It wasn’t the kills he was excited by, it was their creators. He’s honouring them. With Hobbs maybe he wished to catch his eye? No, that seems too servile. With Wells he was taking part in the creation of a masterpiece, and with Budish he was turning the man’s own fear into a work of art.”

“Wells? You mean you believe the second killer and Copycat to be synonymous?” Will turned to look at Hannibal as he, in turn, viewed Will with curiosity, “and also Budish? I understood he committed suicide.”

“Officially,” Will said, “off the record I think that’s a little far-fetched. He was sliced open and strung up, hands and feet all tied in the wrong order before death. The only theories we have about how it could have been done without help are very thin. It’s just speculation but I’m putting him in the pile.”

“An official pile? Or one of your own making?” Lecter asked.

“Right now,” Will sighed, sitting back against the couch, “pretty much my own. No, actually that’s over exaggerating.”

“Jack does not wish to listen, I assume.”

“Jack likes to listen to solid theories, ones he can pick up and look at, shift around and see all the angles of,” Will said, “right now this one has more holes than links. So far it’s just a few unexplainable details and a gut feeling,” he felt foolish saying it out loud, “something I can see but can’t completely explain. Not yet. I need more time with the Copycat and now, well...until I’m no longer a suspect I won’t be getting any more time with him.”

“I would not allow it to worry you, the evidence against you appears to be mainly circumstantial,” Lecter said, “and as such I believe they are clutching at straws in implicating you. Your straw is unlikely to be short, Will. Freddie Lounds is attempting to cut steel with copper scissors. She will only find herself damaged by the outcome.”

“I hope you’re right.”

His mind was alight with possibilities, but dulled by the prospect of losing the scent. As if offering an interruption his stomach contracted, roiling slightly with a familiar pang of hunger. He instinctually glanced up at the clock; eight oh seven stared back at him. Checking his watch confirmed it. He shook his head. The day seemed to have skipped by in jolts, leaving nothing behind.

“I’m sorry,” he said, making Hannibal frown lightly, “I didn’t realise how late it had gotten. I haven’t even offered you anything to eat,” *if I have anything half edible*, he thought hastily,

“let me, uh, check what I have.”

As he stood he heard scuttling claws clicking on the floorboards. He walked towards the kitchen and was met with Pugsley, his little black eyes staring up at Will as his stubby tail jiggled in semblance of a wag. He heard Lecter stand from the couch, the clink of his glass being placed against the coffee table.

“Yes,” Will said to the small dog, “I’ll take you out in a minute.”

“Do not fluster yourself on my account,” Lecter said as he walked into the kitchen, standing in the doorway, hands in his pockets.

“I just wasn’t...” he opened the fridge and stared at the sparse contents; milk, cheese, eggs, a tub of tomatoes and the chicken he’d been planning to roast, “I’m not exactly equipped for guests. Would you like, um...” Will opened the drawers at the bottom of the fridge, hoping he’d left something useful there.

Behind him Pugsley whined. Will stiffened on feeling two hands slide over his shoulders.

“I do wish you would relax,” Hannibal said, his words close to his ear as he leaned in, “it’s very distracting.”

“Well, you have a certain way of unnerving people,” Will said, licking his lips as Hannibal surveyed his fridge.

“Only you, dear Will. I do wonder why that is. Perhaps you can ponder it while you take your pack for a walk. I shall tend to dinner.”

“Oh and that makes me a *far* better host,” Will mumbled, shaking his head as he turned, “I didn’t bring you here to put you to work.”

“Then why did you bring me here?” Lecter asked bluntly as he stepped back to unbutton his cuffs and begin carefully rolling up his sleeves.

“Actually now that I think about it, I didn’t,” Will said, looking anywhere but the man in front of him, his tone clipped. You’re only making this worse, he thought, “alright. Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Give me forty minutes,” Lecter said as he unbuttoned his waistcoat and let it drop from his shoulders.

Will tried to remember the last time he had shared his dinner table at home with another. It turned out, as he swallowed down the chicken in his mouth, that since moving to Wolf Trap he hadn’t shared it with anyone, barely even himself. If he wasn’t eating food in his office while he worked late he tended to take most meals on the couch with work in front of him on the coffee table, or an old film on the television. He decided not to bring that up as a conversation topic considering Lecter’s sacred treatment of his own dining room.

“That was delicious,” Will said, unable to keep the small, impressed smile from his face as he leaned his elbows on the table and held his hands clasped beneath his chin, “thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Hannibal said, wiping his mouth with a piece of kitchen roll.

On his return from the cold outside, the skies clear and the moon waning, Will had found his house filled with wonderful smells and the sound of cooking from the kitchen. He had stopped a moment, under the pretence of removing his shoes and jacket, to enjoy the homeliness it presented. So used to returning home to complete silence, it was a welcome novelty. Even more so when he found Lecter finishing his miracle; spatchcocked roast chicken with spaghetti and fresh tomato sauce. Simple but entirely wonderful, and something he wouldn’t have thought of or known how to do himself. Normally he would have dismissed the chicken as an hour and a half roast and taken something out of the freezer to throw in the microwave. Will admonished himself when he realised, while he ate, that he was thinking he could quite happily get used to this.

Their talk moved through a set of motions, starting with David Bressinden in his old days, *he didn’t really appreciate people’s privacy,* moving to Will’s time at the academy, *I really don’t have any wild stories to tell you, other than the time I accidentally set fire to the library*, moving to Hannibal’s days as a junior doctor, *it would be rather unfair to call it a prank, considering I am quite sure he never walked again*, to a teeth pulling exercise in trying to learn of Will’s childhood, *boatyard to boatyard, what else can I tell you that you haven’t already told me about myself?*, to a complete skip over Lecter’s childhood altogether in order to swerve into Abigail.

“Things are going quite well,” Hannibal said as he sat back in the dining chair, “I am sure, if the committee deems her progress suitable in the next two weeks, there should be no problem in bringing her home with me. I am, after all, well suited to deal with any issues she might have in the interim.”

“Is that what she wants?” Will asked, piling their plates together.

“She does,” Hannibal nodded once, “I feel she still has trust issues, an inability to separate both you and myself from the events of that day, but I am sure she will come to peace with that over time.”

“And Jack?” Will knew he didn’t have to explain it, “what if he doesn’t leave her in peace?”

“As you said, Jack only looks at solid theories.”

“Or theories he likes the look of,” Will said, “he can be a dog with a bone about a hunch.”

“Then I am sure that when he finds nothing to support his hunch,” Lecter said, “he will let it go naturally. Abigail needs a family, Will. A stable foundation from which to go on ahead. Without that I fear she may flounder.”

“She’s stronger than she looks,” Will said, straightening the cutlery on the plates, “but I’ll give it to you, sometimes she’s weaker than she lets herself be. I don’t know. Sometimes I

think she might need to be away from all this, from us. It'll only continue to make it real for her, keep it fresh."

"Is that what you want?" Hannibal asked, watching him closely, "Her to be away from us?"

"No," Will said easily, shaking his head, "but then it isn't about what I want or don't want."

"Perhaps what you want is to be free of her resentment," Hannibal said, taking a drink of water, "you have told me you feel Hobbs was the one to take your innocence; could it be association flows both ways? Is it her fear or your own which will be kept fresh?"

"Analysis for dessert?" Will chided, his tone tinged with bitterness, "You'll give us indigestion."

"Think on it, Will," Hannibal said as Will stood with their plates, "but do not worry about it."

Things had naturally progressed back through to the living room. The wine was complimented once more, now a thin melody of complementing flavours without the rough edge. Music was played to fill the silence that Will was becoming wary of satisfying. Where's your confidence now, Graham? He asked himself. The clock clicked to eleven and Will's watch beeped. He took his pills and decided to leave the rest of his wine.

"I can still drive you home," Will had offered, "if you'd like."

"I am sure there is no need."

Will had distracted himself from Hannibal's confident tone by changing the sheets on the bed, while the man in question stood in the living room looking out of the window at the darkness, listening to Schubert. In only his shirt and trousers, tie gone and top buttons undone, he looked more relaxed than Will had ever seen him. The dog beds were moved to surround the couch although Will was sure that wouldn't discourage most of them. He would have to close the door to keep them out, just this once, he thought as he stifled a yawn.

"My apologies, Will," Hannibal said as he looked away from his contemplation in order to observe him, "I brought you home because you were tired, and now all I have done is keep you late."

"That's alright," Will said quickly, "I'm glad you came, I..." he put the sleeping bag down on the couch, "I wouldn't have been very good company for myself tonight," he watched as Hannibal approached him, placing his empty wine glass onto the table; he tried not to sound stiff as he spoke, "I changed the sheets. I'll take the couch. Sorry, I don't have anything that'll fit you," Will's bed-shirts were already snug on his lithe frame. He licked his lips and smoothed his palms down his sides, "if you want..."

"When I asked you to relax, I did not imagine it would be such a chore for you," Hannibal interrupted with a hint of amusement.

A hand appeared under Will's chin; it was tipped up while a steady hand slid around the small of his back. The kiss was as soft as the first but with none of the tension, as tender as

the second but with none of the urgency. Will knew why he was hesitant, *Alana, he lied to me, work is going to be difficult now, I put him in danger, Jack is going to be worse if he finds out, Abigail can't know, what if..?* Hannibal's kiss was deep; swept through him like a rising tidal wave. Will clung to him, giving as good as he got. After they broke apart, breathing hard, he found it distinctly difficult to think past, *fuck it kiss me again*.

They stumbled into the bedroom, entwined, Will kicking the door closed. Clothes were fumbled off on his part, quickly and efficiently removed on Lecter's. They became mixed upon the floor, a testament in cloth to the fixation of each man upon the other. A quick twist of a button, sliding of a zip and Will tripped backwards over the bottoms of his own trousers as they came loose. He fell against the bed, kicking them off. Looking up only made it harder to listen to his resistant mind. The skin beneath the suit was revealed to be less pale than Will expected, chest hair run through with grey to match his ashen tone; broad shoulders and powerful arms which displayed their silken musculature as Hannibal undid his trousers and slid out of everything in one graceful motion, leaving a crumple of material upon the floor.

A creak of floorboards. He leaned in, contracting down and unfurling out over Will; a heat sacred and profane. It smothered him. Each found the lips of the other. Weeks of frustration caused hands to slip and teeth to scrape. Rumpled sheets twisted around ankles. Will struggled to contain himself. A mouthing across his throat, suckling of skin; the flesh beneath reacted, swelled, reddened. Manipulative fingers grasped him, working skilfully. He felt innocent. Not his first time with a man. Only not this close, not this connected, and not this frustrated. Manipulative fingers slipped past the elastic waistband of his boxers and Will turned his face into the curve of Hannibal's collarbone with a suck of breath. A slight tremor ran through his own grip as he reciprocated, fingers curling possessively around Lecter's rigid flesh.

Their skin pressed flush. Hannibal lay on his side, right leg entwined into Will's jumbled set. On his back Will felt shaky; his hand at a difficult angle, his mind similarly acute. The heat was comforting, a contrast to the chill at his toes and the soft plain of his right forearm. Lecter craned his neck down and captured any protestations he would have given. He felt distinctly, lazily trapped and entirely complacent to the feeling. By the time he came he thought he would have been more opposed to the casualness of it all. Now, as his breath shook in his chest, he couldn't think of a single complaint.

Opening eyes he didn't remember closing he was afforded a unique view. How many have seen you like this? Will wondered vaguely as he watched Hannibal's face, calm and serene, eyes closed, seemingly normal but for the high rising pink flush across his cheekbones and the slight furrow between his brows. Will adjusted their position slightly, allowing Hannibal to stretch out on the bed with all the grace of a large, sleek cat. Will kissed him softly even as he twisted his hand, earning him slim lips opened with which to suck in a tight breath. It became even more confusing to feel Lecter's hand wrap around his wrist, stilling his movements.

"And you say I'm the one who needs to relax," he murmured as Hannibal opened distinctly glassy eyes and brought Will's hand up to his mouth, kissing it lightly, "don't you want me to finish..?"

"Tonight was for your ego," Hannibal said, seeming lazily pleased despite his obvious arousal.

"Don't turn me into something selfish."

"Is it selfish if we both feel pleasure? You have allowed me as close as another can claim to be with someone else. I feel it keenly, Will. Your beauty shines brightest when you are unaware of it."

Somehow the words made him shiver, even if he was unable to stop the flush at his neck. He was unused to blatant truths mixed in with high minded compliments. Will smiled jerkily and shook his head, teasing his fingers against Lecter's and enjoying when the man twined them loosely together. When he realised that Lecter had slipped almost expertly out of his aroused state without Will even noticing, he couldn't help but feel that the night had been less about making Will feel better and more about opening him like a gift wrapped box and enjoying the contents.

"So much for my ego, then," he joked half-heartedly.

"But I do so enjoy watching you work," Hannibal said, a quick and disarming smile made Will blink and look away as he rolled onto his back, “perhaps we should clean up.”

“And so much for fresh sheets,” Will said, accepting that would surely be the most vulnerability Lecter was willing to show before the perfect shutters slid back into place.

It was only the third time he’d ever cooked anyone breakfast, not counting his father after a rough night.

He had awoken to find himself faced with the same electric blue digital readout and the same six forty five of every morning; however, the heavy arm across his waist was new. He had smiled into his pillow, turning his head slowly. Hannibal slept on his side, it seemed. His hair frayed down over his closed eyes. Will had rolled his head back to look at the ceiling and assume that even his very shaky luck sometimes cast the dice rolling.

It was another hour until Hannibal finally arose looking distinctly tired, during which time Will had fed, watered and walked the dogs and had a shower. Will assumed he was a late riser and tried to make up for the early sun by offering him a clean towel and an empty bathroom. Hannibal had kissed him good morning. Will had dried his hair and been unable to keep the grin from his face as he listened to the spray of water from the next room.

“There’s coffee,” Will nodded to the cafetiere on the counter; Hannibal, looking distinctly rumpled, walked into the kitchen and accepted the mug Will handed him, “milk in the fridge, sugar beside the biscuit tin.”

“I prefer it black,” Hannibal said as he poured and Will stirred.

Will plated up the scrambled eggs and toast he'd cooked, hoping there was no way to mess up eggs. It was automatic to turn on the television and tune in to the news as a background noise.

"When do you have to be back home for?" Will asked as he ground pepper over his breakfast.

"No later than two," Lecter said, chewing his food and giving Will a small nod of approval; Will couldn't help but smile, shaking his head as he drank his coffee.

"I can drop you on my way to work," Will said.

"That would be..." Will looked up when Hannibal did not finish to find the man looking to the other side of the room where the television played quietly. When Will saw the headline he quickly grabbed the remote and turned up the volume.

'...a third in a string of murders by a man whom police are now calling the Copycat killer has been named. David Bressinden, twenty nine, was found dead yesterday morning at his place of work, the George Peabody library. In a statement given by the Behavioural Analysis Unit at Quantico earlier today, Special Agent Jack Crawford told reporters he could not confirm the theory that this is one in a series of serial killings and is urging both officials and civilians not to take drastic action until further notice. However, sources have disclosed that a consultant for the BAU William Graham, recently spotlighted as the man who executed the Minnesota Shrike, has since been implicated in David Bressinden's murder. In light of this it is speculated that the..."

"Son of a bitch," Will mumbled out, his mouth hanging open; he snapped it shut and clicked mute, standing up and placing the remote down with precise movements.

"I did not realise this was official news," Hannibal said, looking at him with concern.

"It's not," Will said, his smile entirely bitter, "it's really not. Christ, Freddie."

"You believe Ms. Lounds gave them the information," Hannibal did not look in the least surprised.

"Who else knew?" Will said, walking out into the room and stopping, letting out a terse sound of frustration, "Jack would have made damn sure this didn't get out, he can't risk any more screw ups. Unless the second precinct sergeant decided to talk to the press but even Ackles isn't that tight. He hates me but he wouldn't go this far."

"It seems the source of their information is irrelevant now that it has been broadcast," Hannibal said.

"Yeah, irrelevant until..."

The phone let out a shrill tone from the next room. Will sighed and scrubbed at his face tiredly. He wouldn't lie and say that he thought this was the beginning of something better but he'd at least hoped for one more day to enjoy before the stag's hooves hammered out his

judgement call. He walked back to the bedroom and picked up the phone from his nightstand, finding a text waiting from Beverly Katz.

Are you watching the news? If not turn it on. Jack is on the warpath.

The phone rang in his hands, making him start. He managed to wait for another full ring before answering, knowing full well who it would be.

“Graham,” he answered.

“I’m guessing you saw it?” Jack’s voice was taught.

“Yeah, I saw it,” Will said, “Freddie working her magic again?”

“We’re going to find out when I haul her in here and damn well squeeze it out of her,” Jack said, sounding like he was at the end of his tether, “I need you in here before the media circus makes its way to you.”

“Right, I’ll be fifty.”

“Take the top floor cark park, I’ll meet you in the office.”

When he returned Hannibal was standing before the television, buttoning his waistcoat as he appeared to read the strip of headlines rolling across the bottom of the screen. Will pocketed his phone.

“I’m sorry, I’ve got to leave in five,” Will said, “I’m going to have to drop you and run.”

“I understand,” Hannibal said as Will hurried to grab his wallet from the dresser and his jacket from the hook by the door; despite his creased shirt Lecter looked a picture of composure as he retrieved his jacket and coat, slipping them on as Will bundled into his padded jacket and pulled his glasses from the inner pocket, “although, if I may suggest an alternate plan,” Will looked to him as he grabbed his keys from the bowl by the door, “that I might accompany you.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a...”

“You have said yourself that Jack is not always willing to listen,” Hannibal said, “perhaps an impartial voice would be more acceptable.”

“I’d hardly call you impartial.”

“And no one knows that better than you,” Hannibal smiled, “no one at all, in fact.”

Will took a deep breath and felt the cool metal of the door handle under his palm. When are you going to accept that you’re not alone in all this? he asked himself. Hannibal watched him quietly, waiting with seemingly infinite patience until Will let the breath out in a short huff.

“Alright,” he nodded, “alright but I don’t have time to stop by your house. Just keep your jacket on.”

“My jacket?” Hannibal looked distinctly amused, grating against Will’s jangled nerves.

“Yeah, your jacket,” he said, opening the door brusquely, “because if you take it off it’s fair to say everyone’ll know you didn’t make it home last night.”

“Well then,” Hannibal said, “may I suggest that you fetch your scarf?”

“What?” Will asked agitatedly.

“Well, if anyone were to notice your neck in accordance with my clothing, I’d say it wouldn’t take a federal agent to put the pieces together.”

Will wasn’t sure if he’d ever heard Hannibal Lecter laugh before. All he could think, as he rushed back into the bedroom to grab the polo neck sweater he kept for particularly cold days, was that he picked his damn moments.

Foi, Confiance et la Poussière de Fée

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in getting this chapter out. I had a friend's birthday party to plan and attend, and a few other things going on.

Title translation: "Foi, Confiance et la Poussière de Fée" - 'Faith, Trust and Pixie Dust" (taken from J. M. Barrie's 'Peter Pan')

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Listening was difficult for two reasons. Firstly, Will disliked incompetence, especially incompetence brought on by false data. Listening to people discuss how to fit a false theory to a case was almost as irritating as that theory being about him.

Secondly, and perhaps most personal if not important, Will just didn't like being talked about behind his back. It set the hairs at the nape of his neck on end, made him stand rigidly straight, arms firmly crossed, and stare straight ahead as he listened. He'd never truly understood his need to know, his need to slow his breathing and strain harder in order to hear each muffled word. Why he didn't just walk away or hum to himself to cover the noise was a sore point. You're doing it to yourself, he thought; memories of home always taunted him at the thought of those five words. Memories of standing perfectly still outside the living room door as his father spoke to the social worker, both keeping their voices to an irritating low. Any stray words caught had only ever hurt.

Purnell was easier to hear than Hatcher or Crawford, her voice being higher pitched than theirs. Before the meeting concluded, obvious from the sound of moving chairs, Will had caught not only '*serious danger to himself and others'* and '*lack of discipline'* but also, and far more telling as far as he was concerned, '*departmental saboteur*'. Will had smirked grimly at the label, pushing up from the wall in order to stand a respectful few feet away when the department heads left Crawford's office. Will didn't look at them as they left and they didn't look at him. A saboteur wouldn't, would he, Will thought with a humour he knew he shouldn't have for the subject; only the ridiculousness of his situation did, sometimes, sink through the malaise of internal politics. He caught Jack's eye as the man stood in the doorway, looking almost as haggard as Will felt. For a moment he thought Jack would pull him inside in order to continue the charade but instead he stepped out and pulled the door to.

"Let's get out of here for a while," he said and Will followed without question.

'Getting out of there for a while' consisted of merely going down the back stairs, out through processing and into the small, paved courtyard surrounded by barren trees between the main office building and the mirrored twin stacks of the Academy teaching buildings where Will kept his own small office. It was a cold day, a slow but steady wind blowing in from the north

east bringing a moist chill from over the ocean. He wished he'd had a chance to grab his coat before leaving. Instead he rolled down his shirt sleeves and buttoned the cuffs, hunching his shoulders as he walked beside Jack. They were quiet for a time, odd considering Will was used to Jack being a straight-to-the-point kind of guy. The hesitation was more disconcerting than the silence itself.

"We didn't find anything," Jack said eventually.

Too right they didn't, Will thought, because if they had it would have been because something was damn well planted. He hadn't been entirely surprised when the two agents from the Oversights division had turned up at his door, with two lab techs in tow, to search his house; he was more internally furious that it had ever reached this stage. Will had taken the dogs outside and spent an hour throwing the ball for them beside his garage. The dogs didn't get tired of it even when Will did. They're in there, his mind kept reminding him as he threw the ball hard and quick out over the low grass, they're in there going through all your closed doors. The thought made his skin itch and Will hated the physical reminder of something he was trying to suppress. When one of the two lab techs had come to find him and tell him they were done he had forced himself not to snap at her. It wasn't her fault after all, he thought as he watched them drive away, it's just her job. The reasoning hadn't helped.

"I know," Will said to Jack, resisting the want to tag on *because there was nothing to find in the first place*.

"The last thing I need from you right now is disrespect," Jack said after a long intake of breath through his nose; the word made Will feel like he truly was talking to his own father again, "I don't think you understand yet just how much of a threat this was. Not just to you, but to the department, to me. This all falls back onto me, in the end."

"I know that too," Will said, qualifying it before Jack could get angry at his 'disrespect', "only this time I didn't do any of it. If you want to take your anger out on someone take it out on Freddie."

"I would," Jack said tightly, "except the only reason she's being such a dog with a bone about you is because you riled her up in the first place. If you would *just* leave it alone Will, and ignore the obvious taunting, it would do us all a lot of favours."

It was true, Will wouldn't allow his own ego to try and temper the statement, but as far as he was concerned that didn't make any difference. It did to Jack, and perhaps others. So he allowed it even though he didn't like it. They cut in behind a low ringed water fountain which was never turned on until early summer. It sat, still and unmoving, the spurious spouts sitting inert above the shivering water.

"I promised I'd stay away from her and I have," Will shrugged, "not much else I *can* do. I'm sure it's not the first time she's had someone tell her what a self-righteous bitch she is to her face."

"I doubt it is," Jack shook his head, "only when *you* tell someone about themselves it tends to sting more than just an insult."

Of which he was well aware. Will kept his shoulders shrugged up around his neck as the wind picked up. He stopped walking and, after a few paces, Jack stopped too. Will was sick of talking about her. He changed the subject.

“So everything has been hashed out then?” he asked.

“Yes,” Jack’s ‘*yes*’ always included a host of qualifiers but Will didn’t press further; Jack would only tell Will if it suited him.

“When do I get back on the case?” he asked.

“You won’t be,” Jack said; Will had known it was coming but it still stung.

“Then can I suggest a replacement?”

That had Jack’s attention. Dark brown eyes stared at him as if trying to tell whether this was some sort of trick. Will wasn’t normally one to offer help when he felt roughly treated, so he didn’t resent the look he was getting.

“Only you’re missing an element of the team,” he carried on, understanding that Jack would stop him if he wasn’t interested, “you need the mind of this killer as well as the physical evidence he leaves behind.”

“You’re suggesting Alana..?” Jack tried to second guess him.

“No, Alana wouldn’t want to see too far into this, don’t drag her somewhere she shouldn’t be,” just the thought of it made Will feel angry; she was one of the few untainted things he had left in his life, the last thing he needed was her doing what he did for a living, “I was thinking of Dr. Lecter.”

Jack had opened his mouth to protest but closed it instead, his eyes drifting to the left, to the still fountain. A few seconds of chill wind and shaking branches before Jack spoke up.

“I don’t think it’s fair to just offer up any psychologist as someone who can see where we need them to see.”

“Don’t be obtuse about it Jack,” Will said wryly, noting that the man wasn’t angry at the comment, more annoyed that he’d been caught out in it, “he knows where to look. He’s helped before and he’s done the QFP stage two, shouldn’t that be enough?”

“You certainly are getting to know each other well I see,” Jack said, raising his eyebrows slightly.

“Not really,” Will shrugged, lying as best he could, “there has to be some inane chat between him asking me about my nightmares and my childhood.”

Or it might have been that he told me about it over dinner last night, after which he fucked me into his bed so hard I nearly passed out when I came. Only no one’s ever going to hear about that. Will tried not to think about being spread out beneath Hannibal’s thorough hands

the night before so as to avoid a blush that would have been difficult to explain. Instead he focused back on Jack.

“Trying to say you’re easy to replace?”

“I’m trying to say that I need replacing, and, as far as I can see, he’s the next best thing.”

Jack nodded and Will took that as enough encouragement that his offering had been accepted. It made him feel better at least. The last thing he wanted was for this case to slip them by because of Lounds’ meddling. Not that he thought the team couldn’t handle it on their own, they all far outstripped him in their respective fields of expertise, only he knew that no one ever wanted to look too closely into the dark places which the killer left behind. Right now, he thought as he considered the lack of physical clues the Copycat left at any of his scenes, that was what they needed the most.

Jack stopped hovering, took another step, and then seemed to go back on his decision to keep quiet, “You know, Will, it isn’t just the circumstantial evidence or Freddie that got you mixed up in all of this. You’ve made it bad enough that people are willing to believe you could, without hesitation.”

No need to ask what the ‘could’ referred to. Could kill a man simply for lying about you. Could mutilate his face until he was unrecognisable and smile while you were doing it. Could imitate the work of a killer because you seem to admire him far more than any sane person should.

“It’s good to know that even FBI agents listen to gossip.”

“That’s not the point,” Jack said, “and you know it.”

“Yeah, I know it,” he said, watching Jack tense up, “that’s what makes me sick about it.”

“I want you to leave the personal aside when you walk through that door,” Jack said purposefully, “and be as objective as you can from now on. If not then we’ll have to revise this set up, and you know how much I don’t want to do that.”

“Can I assume everyone else will leave my personal issues at the door?”

“Never assume anything about other people, Will,” Jack said, finally walking back towards the door, “it’s a dangerous habit.”

Having Hannibal at his side was akin to wearing camouflage. He was a draw for stray eyes but also a deterrent. An exotic, slow poison. Will knew the man wasn’t being purposefully intimidating, he wouldn’t feel the need. Yet his gaze, unrepentantly frank, tended to turn others’ away. A reflective lack of guile which kept Will under its shell until they had left Quantico. Will had never been so glad that Hannibal had suggested accompanying him that morning.

“I think it will rain,” Hannibal had said as they walked back towards the road.

“Maybe it can wash the dirt away,” Will said grimly, looking up into grey clouds; he felt for his car keys and realised that he’d forgotten his jacket inside, “shit. I need to go back. I won’t be long.”

Testament to how distracted he was. He felt unwound and examined, passed through multitudinous fingers who had stared deeply into him as if it were their right. Nothing to find because there had been nothing there, yet it hadn’t stopped them looking.

By the time he re-emerged the rain had started. Will zipped up his jacket and made a run for the car. A shock of red hair slowed his dash, partly blocked by Hannibal’s familiar red, blue and grey tartan back. Will felt that he should have been shocked and angered by Freddie’s presence, only, by this point, it was really no surprise. Neither saw him approach.

“...been terribly rude, Ms. Lounds,” he heard as he walked closer, “what’s to be done about that?”

“Will Graham could always give me an interview,” Freddie’s words made Will choke, “I could give him a chance to clear his name.”

“After you dragged it through the tar and then feathered it?” Will said as he walked past, “I wouldn’t hold your breath.”

He had continued walking, straight past, as if he were merely a casual observer. Yet Freddie didn’t take the decorous route, allowing him his comment, instead she hurried after him with Hannibal walking slowly behind.

“The man of the hour,” she said, walking briskly at his side, “I’m not kidding about the offer, I’ll give you free reign to edit.”

“Sure you will,” he said tightly, “And anyway, asking me for an interview now seems rather redundant, doesn’t it? You did such a good job coming up with all the facts on your own last time.”

“We’re all adults here,” she said, skipping up over the verge as Will turned onto the sidewalk, quickening his pace, “you pushed my buttons and I pushed yours. It’s all just semantics.”

You interviewed my mother*, you cold hearted cow. Will Graham refused to believe the human condition could be reduced to simple semantics.*

“You know your problem Freddie?” he snapped out, “You’ve got no damned principles. You can’t even stick to the principle of hating my fucking guts. If it’ll get you a story you’ll tell your standards to go play in traffic.”

“Standards are for government employees,” she said flippantly, “I can’t be picky.”

He stopped, hauling his small entourage to a halt.

“Then learn to be,” he said, staring straight ahead at Lecter’s black Bentley, “because I don’t want you picking bits out of me. I was told to stay away from you and I’m extending you the same annexe. Stay away from me, stay away from Abigail, stay away from Hannibal, stay away from my family and stay away from my friends. Even you shouldn’t find that too taxing, I don’t have many of those.”

If he’d thought about it before he said it he might have realised just how much he’d let slip. Talking to Freddie was always an exercise in foolish choices.

“Quite the little family you’ve got in mind already, it seems,” she said, looking at him with sharp interest, her gaze flicking to Hannibal; Will could only imagine the lack of reaction she received there, “well then. I suppose I’ll just have to stick to my own intuition where you are concerned.”

Wonderful, Will thought, just wonderful.

Two days after his impromptu meeting with Jack and Will was almost unable to stop himself from fidgeting as he walked down the familiar street and pulled out the still shining, new set of keys. They jingled pleasantly as he fitted the black headed key into the multi-cylinder lock. It opened smoothly and Will scuffed his boots against the doormat as he closed the front door behind him. It had taken a few weeks of convincing Hannibal to finally secure his front door to any sane standard considering who he was and, even on a normal level, just how many expensive goods he owned. Will was sure it had helped that for months now he had been subtly antagonising Lecter about his lack of security. Thus, when it had come to convincing him, it hadn’t taken much pressure to effect the change.

“In the kitchen,” a voice echoed through into the hall as Will hung up his jacket and the bag he had been carrying, and unlaced his boots, toeing them off.

From the overpowering, vigorous smell in the kitchen, and the sink full of pulp filled skins, Will assumed that the orange juice he was handed when he entered was as fresh as it came. Hannibal didn’t watch him as he drank but he did smile to himself when Will let out a sound of appreciation after swallowing.

“Where did you get these?” Will asked as he walked to the juicer on the counter by the sink and picked up the hollowed out half-orange from the press.

“I took a trip to Lexington market earlier today,” Lecter said as he fussed with something in greaseproof paper on the island counter, “I could smell them while I was buying lobster. Remembered that you said how much you love blood oranges but can never find them.”

“You didn’t have to,” Will felt a stab of his own familiar, stiff reaction to the courtesy, still unused to people thinking about his wellbeing so casually.

“Not at all,” Lecter said as he stepped to the side to unravel straw coloured string from a ball on the counter and cut it with long, steel scissors.

“Thanks,” he said, pushing down the awkwardness, taking another drink from his glass. Refocus, he thought before his mind could begin its usual stressing, “so, do you have it?”

“Have what?”

“Have what, he asks,” Will said, shaking his head, “you know what.”

“Yes, I do know what,” Lecter said as he picked up the, now secured, long round of greaseproof paper and transported it to the freezer.

“No, I’m not playing this game,” Will said wryly, following him, “really, I’m not in the mood.”

“That is unfortunate, as I find it rather amusing.”

“Alright, then I’ll just be in the drawing room until you feel the need to stop,” Will said.

He turned on the lights and walked the length of the room to stand by the window, looking out at the darkening sky as he drank. It was pleasantly warm in the house, enough that he could imagine it was closer to summer than it really was. He rocked back on his heels and took a long drink, finishing it and placing the empty glass on the coffee table. He smiled, unable to stop himself from reading the clear signs. Hannibal had got it, he must have. If he hadn’t the man would have been far more peremptory, far sharper in his movements and wouldn’t have allowed Will to wait the five minutes he ended up standing and observing the sky. He heard footsteps behind him, closer and closer, until hands slid around his waist and a solid chest pressed against his back.

“Do you need me to tell you?” Lecter said into his ear.

“No,” Will said, unable to stop himself leaning back into the embrace.

“I thought not,” Hannibal said as Will turned to face him.

“You’re...” silenced with a kiss Will pulled back after a few moments’ indulgence, “stop it. Tell me. I want to hear about it.”

“Not much to tell,” Hannibal said, “I applied for guardianship and it was approved.”

“Seems too simple somehow.”

“Life is not always a complex web, sometimes the finer threads are simple,” Hannibal said, quickly dismissing the conversation, “now you had better get dressed, or we are going to be late.”

“Get dressed?” Will said, enjoying Lecter’s narrowed eyes, “But I am dressed.”

“In the basest sense of the word,” Hannibal said with an arrogance Will was sure the man wasn’t even aware of anymore, “but not dressed for the opera. Now, we are already pushed for time and if I have to...”

“Have to learn how to take a joke,” Will finished for him, “then we’ll be here till the end of days,” he nipped in for a soft kiss as he passed on his way back to the front door, while Hannibal watched him with curiosity, “give me five minutes.”

He hung the suit on the back of the master bathroom door and looked at it, remembering how furious he had been when it had turned up at his door. His lips thinned and he forced himself to see it for what it had been. It hadn’t been anger, not really; he knew that now at least. It had been worry, fear even, and a need to contain that fear. The jacket was slightly heavier than he had expected when he lifted it from the hanger, the lining cool against his fingertips. Fear of someone trying to contain him, trying to compel him. Fear that, over all those thoughts, he was suddenly allowed to have the normal things, the everyday things, the affection and the courting and the subtle glances. Fear, underlying that, of Hannibal’s words weeks before telling him that he was the man who could never fit into society. Or the most baffling of them all: Why would someone like Hannibal Lecter ever be interested in someone like Will Graham?

Will was a good fisherman; he knew why Hannibal had bought it from the moment it had arrived. A perfectly crafted lure just close enough to his own tastes that he wouldn’t be put off by it, but also exquisitely well tailored in order to allow him to fit in where Hannibal deemed it necessary. Only Will didn’t like to feel baited. Then why did you accept it? he questioned himself, annoyed at his own behaviour. Acting like you’re nothing but a plaything. Is that all you think of yourself? Christ, Graham, get a damn grip.

He cares about you, and you fit with him don‘t you? Will swallowed as he slid out of his shirt and undid his belt. And if it doesn’t work? Does that mean I’ll have deprived myself of my only chance at happiness because he’s the only person I’ve ever found who can understand me? When he sees me at my worst will he regret it, all of this? When I hurt him will he forgive me?

Can’t live your life on when’s and what-if’s kid. His father’s words drifted out of his memory along with the smell of cigar smoke and a warm summer evening. Will licked his lips and tried to take some more recent words of advice he’d been given: *think on it, Will, but do not worry about it.* He hoped that Lecter’s words and his father’s advice could keep him from making a stupid mistake he’d kick himself for later.

Hannibal was in the bedroom when Will emerged from the bathroom brushing his hands down over his shirt and adjusting his tie. He looked up to find maroon eyes trained upon his person, assessing him, while Lecter pulled an unfastened bow tie around his white shirt collar.

“You’re wearing a tux?” Will asked, feeling a little caught out.

“I always do to the opera,” Lecter said.

“Oh,” Will swallowed, trying for humour, “well, I hope they don’t stop me at the door.”

“Dear Will, so very self-conscious,” Hannibal said as if simply noting the behaviour to himself, cocking his head slightly; the thought made Will uneasy but he kept quiet.

“Pessimists are self-conscious,” Will said, pulling at his cuffs to straighten the sleeves, “I’m just a realist.”

“Clothes and manners do not make the man,” Hannibal said as if by rote, “but, when he is made, they greatly improve his appearance.”

“Wilde?” Will guessed.

“Henry Ward Beecher,” Hannibal corrected.

“Then I’ll take it as a compliment,” Will said, “even if I’m not sure why it’s necessary.”

“Jūs esate labai pageidaujamas,” Lecter said, smiling the small secretive smile he liked to use when he said something Will couldn’t understand; he walked to Will, reaching up to run his right hand down his throat and over the front of his shirt, “ir, tiesą sakant, aš norėčiau atlupti tuos drabužius, nesvarbu, kaip gerai jūs žiūrėti.”

“Translation?” Will asked, still trying to figure out the language; he refused to ask and Lecter, picking up on the game, had not offered an explanation as of yet. In fact he seemed to thoroughly enjoy tormenting Will with its use.

“Translation,” Lecter offered, “being that if the tickets for tonight hadn’t been so thoroughly expensive and I hadn’t been looking forward to seeing the *Amleto* for months now, then we would not be leaving this bedroom for the rest of the evening. Unless of course you wished to christen one of the other rooms.”

Will could feel the blush creeping up his throat. He took hold of Hannibal’s hand, still against his chest, and removed it, pushing it back against Hannibal’s own.

“Awfully full of ourselves, aren’t we,” Will said, even as the heat at his throat decided to begin spreading to more interesting but entirely inappropriate areas.

“When I know it is justified.”

Will went to the guest bedroom while Hannibal finished getting ready so as to resist temptation. The room was already underway in its transformation from rather sterile to homely and age appropriate. A soft green for the bedspread, Abigail’s favourite or so Will assumed from the amount of clothes she possessed in the colour. The brocaded, heavy curtains were now white linen with pale green muslin behind. Black and white photographs were upon the walls; Paris, New York, London. A computer desk with a slim laptop sat in one corner by the window. An armchair in the opposite corner facing a television on a cabinet already half filled with DVDs. A bookshelf, stocked to the brim with classics.

Will put his hands in his pockets and felt a shade of calm work its way over him. Things were looking up, they were, no matter how much went wrong things *were* getting better. Hannibal was right, he normally was, not that Will would ever tell him so. A family, that’s what Abigail needed, to have a family and a home. To have Alana as her comfort, and Hannibal and Will there to look out for her. Just her, huh? his conscience niggled at him. Is she the only

one who needs a family? He let the thought linger as Hannibal entered the room behind him. Will looked over his shoulder at the man.

“It looks great,” Will said honestly, distracting himself from his thoughts, “I think she’s going to love it.”

“I hope so,” Hannibal said, “she was nervous when I visited her yesterday. I think she is worried about leaving the safety of Port Haven. Everyone there knows what happened to her and have become used to her presence. Now she will have to face the outside world and all the unpredictability that it brings.”

“Well at least she can relax here,” Will said, even though he didn’t really believe his own words, “she can breathe easy knowing she doesn’t have to go outside unless she really wants to.”

“Which you already know to be a falsity,” Hannibal said, catching Will’s hesitation, “she is as much able to hide from the world as the moon is from the sun. Abigail is drawn by the independence she has never fully tasted, but shies from the enormity of her task. She will overcome it with time. You both will.”

The words made Will take a deep breath and let it out as a controlled sigh.

“What have I told you about analysing me before dinner,” he gave Lecter a steady look, “anyway, when the hell have I ever shied away from the world?”

“What a terrible question to ask when you know what the answer would be,” Hannibal smiled, “but that was not the thing to which I was referring.”

“Oh yeah?” Will said, hating that he couldn’t help but ask.

“I was referring to you accepting that I have no intentions of giving you up for any reason,” Hannibal said, making Will stand rigidly with his hands gripping his elbows, “despite the fact that you appear to worry about this subject at least once each time we are together.”

“You sure pick your moments,” Will said tightly, looking at his watch, “come on, we’d better go. The reservation is for half six.”

“As you wish,” Lecter said, unable to resist, it seemed, reaching out to run his hand down Will’s jacket, settling against the small of his back.

Then the pressure was gone and Lecter walked out of the room, as ever leaving Will unsure of the sheer easy casualness with which Hannibal showed his affection for him. The effortlessness with which he observed his inner workings, like a horologist watching the cogs turn and the pendulums swing; in sync, out of sync, in, out. Will wet his lips and told himself that Hannibal wasn’t Alana, Hannibal wasn’t watching him like a lab rat, ready to take notes and work up a groundbreaking journal article on the insecurities of the empathically disordered. He wasn’t, he assured himself unsuccessfully. Just another neuroses he could add to the list, Will thought as he joined Lecter at the bottom of the stairs.

Will sat at the table, feeling slightly out of place but hiding it under his thorough scrutiny of the man across from him, and ignored the menu. He already knew he didn't know what to order and that he would defer to Hannibal's good judgement. That, in itself, had been rather freeing. He wasn't a control freak, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he did resent other people trying to impose themselves upon him. Which was why it was rather novel to realise he didn't entirely mind Hannibal doing so. Perhaps because said 'imposing' tended to be more mutual than he was accustomed to.

The restaurant was implicitly upper class, to the point where money ceased to matter and status seemed to become a mitigating factor. Will was entirely sure that if he'd turned up alone he'd have had a snowball's chance in hell of getting a table. As it was, turning up at the side (or on the arm, depending on how you wanted to look at it) of Doctor Hannibal Lecter appeared to open many doors. Including the one into a dining room filled with elegant, white clad tables and tuxedoed waiters, stylishly modern chandeliers hanging from the Victorian ceiling and delicate silverware. Truthfully he would have rather enjoyed a quiet dinner at home, just the two of them, but Hannibal had insisted.

"You know I never would have guessed you let other people cook for you," Will said as Hannibal studied the wine list intently while he drew tiny circles on the table cloth with his left index finger.

"I allow you to cook for me," Hannibal said, not looking up.

"I've cooked for you once," Will said dryly, "and that was scrambled eggs. I mean cook for you like this. I think I remember you saying you liked to know exactly what you're putting in your body, or something along those lines."

"I do, only there's no fun in not taking risks now and then."

"I also didn't know you were one to leave things to chance."

"This is an excellent restaurant, I know the chef personally," Lecter flicked his eyes up to catch Will's gaze, "the variegations of chance are significantly limited. Do you know what you want?"

"No," Will said, closing his menu, "choose me something I'll like."

That garnered a smile, small and suitable for polite company but with a subtle hint of fervent possessiveness hidden beneath the restraint. Will wasn't entirely sure how to feel about that as he poured them both water from a large carafe, while Hannibal ordered for them both in fluent French. He watched the light dance in his glass as he turned it, only half listening to the attractive words spilling between the two as they talked. The crystal fractured the pure white into a sharp rainbow. He wasn't used to places like this, certainly not entirely comfortable in them, but he could certainly adapt to them. If there was one thing he was good at it was making himself small in a crowd.

"Would you prefer duck or quail?"

“Hmm?” he looked up to find Hannibal watching him, the waiter still standing by patiently, “oh, well...” he’d never had either and so decided it was fifty-fifty, “quail.”

Their order was finished in a few short sentences and a deferential nod from the waiter before leaving. Hannibal leaned his elbows on the arms of his dining chair and steepled his fingers. Will took a drink of water and knew, just from the man’s stance and his curious gaze, what was coming.

“I really don’t want to talk about work while I’m eating,” Will said before Hannibal could start.

“It seems you have many stipulations about when things must happen in relation to mealtimes,” Hannibal said, continuing on even when Will set his jaw, “no analysis before breakfast or dinner, no work with a meal. Actually I was merely wondering whether you were still under scrutiny from the Inspector General’s office.”

“No,” Will said, moving his fork until it was perfectly in line with his plate, “no, they’re done with me. The evidence was circumstantial, they found nothing at my house or at the scene to link me to the crime other than Freddie’s word and a few notes that were sent to Bressinden. It seems they finally realised I had nothing to do with them either.”

“Handwritten?”

“No, printed. Paper looked lightweight, cheap, and the ink was faded. Could be from anywhere just by looking at it, but I’m sure they’ll have more luck in the lab.”

“Then Uncle Jack has seen fit to realise his folly.”

“The onus isn’t on him,” Will said, unsure why he was even trying to placate Lecter’s irritation for Crawford, “not just on him anyway. I don’t think my reputation in the Bureau is exactly stellar.”

“When it comes to how far he’s willing to move you across the board to get what he wants, he’s certainly no saint,” Hannibal said, “don’t you agree?”

“I’d rather not think of myself as on the board at all,” Will replied dryly.

The waiter reappeared with half a carafe of golden yellow wine, pouring a sample to taste into Lecter’s wine glass. There was a glass of something deeply orange placed by Will’s plate. He picked it up and tasted it while Lecter sipped, nodded and allowed the waiter to expertly fill his glass. Passion fruit juice. Will licked the sweet fruit from his lips. It still disconcerted him slightly that Lecter had obviously picked up on his tastes with expert precision, even without the memory of mentioning his penchant for exotic fruit. He wished he could feel as confident about his abilities to predict Lecter, thinking about how to tell Hannibal that he’d essentially volunteered him as Will’s replacement without asking.

“So,” Hannibal continued, “you have been reinstated, so to speak.”

“Well, to an extent,” Will said, “actually it seems I’m not going to be brought back in on this one.”

That garnered an interesting reaction. Will wondered if anyone else would have recognised the subtle lift of Hannibal’s chin and the tightening of his lips. Will could see annoyance, mixed in with dislike for the turnout. This could go either of two ways, he thought as he watched Hannibal closely.

“I see,” Hannibal said, “then the situation is not quite as stable as presumed.”

“Not entirely,” Will acquiesced, “just because I’m out of the firing line doesn’t mean I’m not still in their sights. The Harpy still wants me out.”

“Harpy?” Hannibal asked, the edges of his mouth quirking slightly.

“Purnell,” Will sighed, “thought I’d better come up with a nickname so I can talk about her at work. Harpy seemed appropriate.”

“The bringers of punishment and the heralds of woe,” Hannibal said, “let us hope it is not as appropriate a name for her as you seem to think.”

Conversation stopped while their starters were served. Dry aged Carpaccio with braised endives and soy dressing for Hannibal, Wild mushroom stuffed quail with truffle sauce for Will. He felt like laughing at the ridiculous level of opulence but kept his composure for Hannibal’s sake. Once the waiter left Will couldn’t help visualising the chef trying to keep up with the wants of his rich customers by stuffing foie gras and white veal up a roasted swan before garnishing it with gold leaf. He let out a small laugh and covered it with his napkin. Hannibal was watching him curiously.

“Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” Will said; he looked at Hannibal and couldn’t tell whether it would be a good idea or not, but in the end couldn’t help himself. Will gestured to his plate, “it’s just so...theatrical.”

“You asked me to order you something you would like,” Hannibal said, slightly stiff.

“And instead I’ve been given the most expensive starter on the menu, I’m sure,” Will said; Hannibal gave him a sharp look but Will smiled in return; showing off, Will thought, “you’re doing it again.”

“I do not know this ‘it’ to which you refer,” Hannibal said gently but with an underlying frustration, “nor do I wish to know. Now eat your food.”

It was wonderful; that he could not deny. The quail was slightly dry but balanced by the succulent mushrooms with a hint or garlic and tarragon. He wasn’t so keen on the truffle sauce but felt obliged to try it considering he was sure it was the most expensive thing on the plate. He decided to lay off pushing Hannibal for reactions.

“Actually I have some news as well,” he said as the waiter came to take away their plates; Hannibal looked up from wiping his mouth with a pristine napkin. Will pushed his glasses up

his nose and wet his lips, “I didn’t think you’d mind but I put you forward as a candidate now that Jack’s struggling for a psychological perspective on the Copycat.”

It would be fair to say that Hannibal didn’t react at all. Somehow Will found that more odd than the multitude of reactions he had prepared for.

“I see,” Hannibal nodded, “well, this is certainly an advancement at least.”

“Advancement?” Will frowned, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Until recently I felt it was safe to assume that you did not trust me,” Lecter was blunt, as always, and it made Will uncomfortable, as always, “not fully. Not enough for something such as this.”

“Hannibal, for crying out loud,” Will said, shaking his head softly, “I don’t trust the woman behind the counter at the cafeteria not to put too much milk in my coffee. It doesn’t come naturally for me, but I would have thought you’d picked up on it by now. If I didn’t trust you I wouldn’t have told you half the things I have.”

“The human want to share oneself,” Hannibal smiled as if at a personal joke, “one of the messy equations of existence. All those nasty variables. I hope I do not put yours off balance.”

“Only when you try your hardest,” Will said, “I’m just happy you’re not put out by this.”

“On the contrary,” Lecter said, “I have every faith in myself; and I appreciate the trust, Will. I know how hard it is for you.”

“Yeah,” Will said, watching him, “oddly enough I think you do.”

Their main appeared not too long after. Will was not at all surprised by Hannibal’s incredibly rare filet mignon with crisped onions and béarnaise sauce. The man was an outrageous and entirely unapologetic carnivore as far as Will was concerned. His turned out to be pan-fried swordfish paillard with citrus salad and homemade tartar sauce. Will couldn’t think of anything clever to say about it, considering he had his mouth full from start to finish. The table was quiet as they ate. He almost wished they were at home so that he could make the sinful noises of appreciation the food in his mouth was tempting him to. Instead he made do with closing his eyes every now and then, as if shutting off one sense only heightened his ability to taste.

He sat back in his chair and ran the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip. When he looked up from his plate Lecter was openly watching him, his left hand upon the table, the index finger and thumb of his right against his lips. Will knew the look all too well by now.

“What?” he asked, even though he was well aware; Hannibal, as Phyllis had previously realised, appeared to enjoy watching Will eat, “Do we have time for desert?”

“Perhaps later,” Hannibal said, his eyes smiling; Will cleared his throat discretely, “for now, I think we should leave before it gets too late, else we will be forced to find somewhere

undesirable to park."

It was not that he found it boring, as such, just that he did not enjoy the medium. Will would admit he could appreciate the abilities of the performers and even enjoy sections of the music itself, but beyond that it was a tedious slog through two and a half hours of high and low pitched Italian that he could not understand a word of.

He found himself, for the mainstay, surreptitiously watching Hannibal as he sat to Will's right. Enraptured was perhaps the word he would choose; captured by sight and sound so completely that maroon eyes lit up, staring into a space which existed only for the one who sees it; no one else.

Will had observed him in this state two times only: watching the meteor shower from the roof of his rented cabin, and at Will himself as he had sat upon the couch and told Hannibal of his deepest fear. Vulnerable and desperate for someone to see him, really see him.

"Maybe I don't want to know who I am."

"Then perhaps I do."

Hannibal had reached out and taken his drowning hand thrust up above the water's surface. The memory made him feel oddly hot under the skin. Will stared, enjoying Lecter's careless enjoyment, taking pleasure in this glimpse behind what were, usually, carefully shuttered eyes.

He looks at you that way, Will thought as he returned his gaze to the stage, vibrant in red and gold, the players striving to fulfil their roles. As if you were the most fascinating thing he's ever seen. Or is it just a novelty? his conscience supplied unhelpfully. A meteor's bright streak is fleeting. Will quashed the thought as it bit sourly into his evening. When the intermission rolled around he clapped along with everyone else.

"Shall I get us something to drink?" Hannibal offered as they walked out into the elegant lobby in a chattering crowd, lit with gold and cream.

"Sure," Will nodded, trying his best not to show his discomfort.

Hannibal left, weaving gracefully through the crowd, and Will knew he felt worse for it. Being alone amid the host of strangers had a claustrophobic effect, forcing Will's hands into his expensive pockets. The lining felt pleasant against his hands, soft and smooth. Suddenly he began to resent the suit he was wearing as he scanned the darkly clad clientele.

"I wouldn't have pegged you as a fan of the opera."

The familiar voice revealed a familiar face as Will turned. Phyllis Crawford stood behind him holding a glass of champagne in one hand, the other slid around her waist over a dark purple dress.

“Hi,” Will said, adjusting to the unexpected sight, “I mean hello,” he stalled, blinking rapidly, before continuing with the first thing that came into his head, “Jack didn’t say anything about...”

“My husband isn’t attending tonight,” Phyllis interrupted politely, as if noting Will’s struggle, “I’m here with a friend.”

“Oh, right,” Will said, looking somewhere over her shoulder, “uh, same actually.”

“Let me guess,” she said, her eyes curious, “obligation?”

Will couldn’t help but smile uncertainly, ducking his head. An odd interaction, he thought, considering who he was speaking to out of the blue. *Obligation*. Memories of that night in the kitchen; of her natural intuition and blunt temperament. Seeing right through him and out the other side. Had she seen Hannibal seated beside him? Is that how she knew?

“Something like that,” Will said evasively, nodding; he could see her observe the crowd somewhat dispassionately out the corner of his eye, “so, are you enjoying it?” Will liked small talk as much as he enjoyed opera, but, this once, he made the effort.

“Not at all,” she shrugged, finishing half of her glass in one long drink; Will cleared his throat, “but it was reason enough to escape the house. And better than pretending to go to sleep so I don’t have to talk to my husband.”

“Right,” Will said, uncomfortable at the thought of seeing into Crawford’s guarded private life; his desperate line of thought swung rapidly through the air, “you could plead narcolepsy.”

“I’m not up for falling to the ground every couple of hours just to take the edge off my marriage.”

“Kidney failure,” he suggested.

“Too many urine tests,” she smiled.

“Iron deficiency.”

“Too many blood tests.”

“Dropsy.”

Her laugh was small and low but hard won. Will hoped she hadn’t picked up on the obvious choice he’d left out. There was an instinctual need to see her smile. He surprised himself when he found he was looking into her hazel eyes for her reaction. His gaze skipped away self-consciously, coming to rest on Hannibal as seen through the crowd of moving bodies, one hand propped against the bar as he leaned in to speak to the bartender, accentuating the long line of his back.

“Remind me not to come to you for fake medical advice,” he heard her say; Will wasn’t sure how to reply, leaving his eyes to linger for too long, “be careful Will,” she said in a confiding

tone, pulling his gaze guiltily back to her, “your obligation is showing.”

“I...” he felt stupid for hesitating, getting straight to the point, “look, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t say anything to Jack about this.”

“I’m not my husband’s spy,” she said in a straight forward tone.

“Don’t take it personally,” Will said, “I’m naturally paranoid.”

“A good thing to be,” she said, finishing her drink.

“Oh, there you are! I got us both another free one.”

A tall woman in a slinky black dress, her blond hair wound up in an elegant bun, bustled up to Phyllis with a smile and handed her another glass of champagne. She seemed to notice Will as a kitten notices a ball of yarn, turning to him with an overly friendly smile and an automatic handshake. Her mouth was wide, showing perfect teeth beneath a long, slim nose.

“Who’s this?” she asked rhetorically, grabbing Will’s closest hand, shaking it tightly; he resisted the urge to pull back and step away, “I’m Gina, Phyllis’s friend from work. And you are?”

“This is Will Graham,” Will appreciated Phyllis answering for him, “he works with Jack.”

“Oh! Yes, I’ve heard about you,” Gina said enthusiastically; Will noted her eyes seemed too large for her face, bright blue and baby-like, and her cadence was a mile a minute to match; probably a tremendous over-achiever, Will thought, hiding it beneath airheaded bubbliness, “from the newspaper, the Minnesota Shrike. You’re a celebrity around our place, right Phyllis? Remember James from Corporate Fraud?”

“James is a true crime nut,” Phyllis said to Will in a rather bored tone, sipping her new drink.

“Right, total nut,” Gina laughed and it wasn’t pretty, “has all these paper clippings about you. Never shut up about it. Kind of a creepy guy actually. So yeah, the Shrike, that must have been crazy huh? I heard them say on the news that you’re working on the Chesapeake Ripper case though. Scary guy, I watched a show on primetime last week, he’s been loose for *years*. Just some normal looking guy I bet, probably walking around the streets and no one even knows he’s there.”

“Most of them are,” Phyllis said, looking into her drink; Gina continued quickly.

“Really sick,” she said, looking exaggeratedly disgusted, even as she lowered her voice in the guise of gossip, “killed a man a couple of years ago, stabbed him with *every tool* on the board at his workshop. Pinned to the wall like a post-it-note. I mean who thinks like that?”

“Psychopaths,” Will said almost involuntarily; luckily she didn’t seem to pick up on the chill in his tone and instead laughed in response.

“Yeah, good point,” she said, smiling interestedly, her eyes doing a quick dance down him and then back up, “so, are you here on your own? That’s no fun. Can I get you a drink?”

“No need,” Will heard a voice say from over his shoulder.

Will felt Hannibal walk up beside him and stand close, no need to turn and look. Will took the glass he was handed with a soft ‘thank you’ and tried not to sigh as he felt a hand settle firmly against the base of his spine. Why don’t you just piss all round me, Will thought dryly, I’m sure that’d make your point just as clear.

“Mrs. Crawford, it is wonderful to see you,” Lecter said demurely.

“Dr. Lecter,” Phyllis greeted him with warm professionalism, “Gina, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter,” Phyllis did her introductions by rote, it seemed, “this is Gina Harper, my colleague.”

“A pleasure,” Gina said, her disappointed eyes flitting between Hannibal and Will.

“That remains to be seen,” Hannibal said, his gaze steady and, Will knew from experience, disconcertingly unreadable; once more Gina laughed, although this time Will was sure she hadn’t missed the subtext.

“Well, we should get back to our seats,” Phyllis said to Gina, giving the woman her second glass of champagne.

“Yeah,” Gina said, “don’t want to have to make the whole row stand again so we can get in, that was awkward.”

“It was nice seeing you again, Will,” Phyllis said before they left.

“You too,” he said, realising that he meant it; to him Phyllis Crawford was refreshingly unassuming.

They were left in a pocket of silence amidst the murmuring masses. Will took a drink of what turned out to be water, glad for it as he was thirsty more than anything else, and looked straight ahead as he spoke. Hannibal’s hand was still at his back.

“Well,” Will said resignedly, “that was deeply unnecessary of you.”

“I do not appreciate crudeness,” Hannibal said as if it were a satisfactory explanation.

“You bring me somewhere that requires me to be sociable,” Will said quietly, “then put your hackles up when I am. My life is unpredictable enough as it is; I’d rather you didn’t add to that. I prefer you as a constant.”

“As do I,” Hannibal said.

It was mid afternoon and the clouds were pearlescent with hidden sunshine. There was no wind, allowing the early spring insects to float lazily on parallel films of air. He sat beside Abigail with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped together, while she plaited her hair. They had been mainly silent since he arrived with a suitcase for her and helped her pack the few

things she had. He had stood by her while she said goodbye to the nurses, and even one of the other patients, without saying a word.

The bush on the opposite side of the path rustled as a wood pigeon, heavy and fluttering, landed there on the bending twigs. He watched as it settled, head moving jerkily from side to side as it watched him with beady red eyes. Abigail was a shifting figure in his peripheral vision, eyes worried and face drawn. Will was glad that, when he reached out to take her hand, she did not pull back. Instead she gripped him tightly, their fingers woven together.

“Don’t worry,” he said, knowing it wasn’t much of a consolation, “it’s going to be ok.”

He had agreed to wait for Hannibal because the man had been adamant on being there when Abigail was brought to the house. First off he had suggested he could drive her there, let them in and meet Hannibal there when he returned from his day. Only that hadn’t been met with agreement. *Association is a heavy tool, Will, one that we bear with us. I would rather Abigail see her new home for the first time with her new family around her.* Not that Will had asked what Hannibal was doing today that he couldn’t be there when Abigail was released. He realised he didn’t tend to pry too closely into the man’s private life and wondered why that was. I’ll ask later, he thought by way of rebellion against his feelings.

The black Bentley turned up ten minutes later and Abigail seemed, to Will’s trained eyes, oddly reluctant. He wouldn’t have expected her to rush towards her new life with a smile, but perhaps move towards it under her own impetus. Will felt as if he pulled her with him when he stood. Hannibal opened the boot and she placed her suitcase inside, before he encircled her in a paternal embrace. Will got the door for her and then hopped in the passenger seat next to Hannibal.

By the time they returned home it was heading towards early evening. Hannibal had needed to stop by the local deli and, while he was busy, Will walked with Abigail around the local shops. He could feel her discomfort and sympathised. The feeling he’d had at the supermarket when he’d been recognised had been an unpleasant one to say the least. He hoped that Abigail didn’t have to suffer that same humiliation for something which was not her fault. He impulse bought her the book she was looking at in the bookstore when she wasn’t looking, feeling idiotic about his lack of confidence. He knew he only bought presents when he was angry or stressed. Over the past couple of weeks he had been a steady mix of the two.

Hannibal drew the curtains in the drawing room and turned on the lights. Will helped Abigail up to her room and placed the book on her nightstand. She looked around her, taking it all in, and seemed unsure of how to react.

“Are you hungry?” Will asked as she began unfolding her clothes and placing them on the bed, “We didn’t get a chance for lunch.”

“No,” she said, “no I’m alright,” she sounded anything but,” actually I’m pretty tired. Didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Abb...Abigail,” Will caught the moniker just in time, “are you really alright?”

“Mmm,” she nodded, “I just...it’s not home,” she said all of a sudden, looking around her, “it can’t be. I don’t even know if that’s a bad thing, I just...I don’t know.”

“Yeah,” Will said, “and that’s alright not to know. You’ll figure things out and we’ll help you.”

“Thanks,” she smiled weakly, “really, I mean it. I know haven’t always been the best person to talk to.”

“Can’t blame you for that,” Will smiled back, even though he knew it was nothing to smile about.

“Yeah, but I didn’t mean it,” she continued, “what I said about you and my dad. I didn’t mean to say it. You saved my life and...and I wish I could just live with that.”

“It takes time,” Will knew he sounded stiff as he spoke; he didn’t feel he was an authority on healing old wounds, but tried his best to, “you’ll get through this. We all will.”

The light flecked amber in her black hair as she nodded, not seeming to truly agree or disagree. Will left her alone to sleep and closed the door behind him. Sometimes he hated reassuring people; it made him feel like a liar.

“Does Abigail want lunch?” Hannibal asked as Will walked into the kitchen; he watched for a few seconds as the man put things away into cupboards.

“No,” Will said, taking a long breath in and letting it out slowly, “I think she wants to take a nap.”

“Understandable,” Hannibal said, rolling out the rack of the small spice cupboard and picking through its contents, “and yourself?”

“I’m not hungry,” he said, walking to the other side of the kitchen island in order to stand behind Lecter; once Hannibal had finished his task he stood up and turned around to face Will, placing a few nearly finished glass jars onto the counter.

“And yet you are not full either,” Hannibal observed.

“Mmm,” Will felt as obliged to answer as Abigail apparently had.

At first he allowed the kiss, but as time passed his shoulders relaxed and his hands crept up to take hold of Hannibal’s arms. Eventually he realised he had been craving the man’s touch since he had awoken that morning. Still, he couldn’t help but listen out for footsteps on the floorboards. For a reason he didn’t want to look into too deeply he did not want Abigail to know about them. Perhaps further fear of rejection he mused vaguely before shutting the thought down altogether.

They broke apart and Will looked down at Hannibal’s chest, wondering when his simple life had become blunted at either end.

"Can I tell you now how much I don't appreciate being smothered?" Will asked.

"Was there a reason you could not before?"

"You weren't in the mood to listen."

"Perhaps," Lecter said, "but I have listened now."

"Alright," Will said, thinking that it was all far too easy, "you already know how I feel. You don't need to bribe me."

"Then please do not feel that what I do," Lecter said, "is for the purposes of *showing off*, as you so crudely put it. I merely wish to treat you as you deserve to be treated. Do you not agree?"

“Maybe,” he said as he rubbed his thumbs over the soft cotton of Hannibal’s shirt, feeling cold, “Truthfully? I just don’t want to have to think for a while.”

“Thinking can be regulated,” Hannibal said calmly, “we have a session tomorrow. Perhaps your thoughts could be postponed until then.”

“I like the sound of that,” Will said with a sigh, leaning forwards and trusting Hannibal to hold him warmly; Lecter was right, it wasn't easy, nor did it come naturally, but Will found that he was not only more than capable, but that it felt wonderful when he did.

Chapter End Notes

Translation of Hannibal's words:

“You look very desirable, and, to be honest, I’d like to rip off those clothes no matter how good you look.”

(Again, apologies if the grammar is wrong! I will try my best to keep it right.)

Raisonnement Franchement Psychotique (première partie)

Chapter Notes

Title translation:
"Raisonnement Franchement Psychotique (première partie)" - 'Frankly Psychotic Thinking (part one)'

He knew it wasn't always healthy, and he knew it wasn't always entirely conscious, but Will's ability to mimic in order to smooth the way between himself and those he cared about was a natural instinct. Speech patterns were his first cue to rising attachment. He would begin to hear others in the lilt of his rhythm and the pronunciation of his vowels. Next came gestures, familiar movements which imprinted themselves onto his hands and face, followed by the sneaking idiosyncrasies of words and phrases.

It wasn't a perfect science and it didn't demean his own individuality. Only it made him less vulnerable, made it easier to blend in and, when done subtly enough, could put the other person entirely at ease without their even noticing it had happened.

Will knew when he'd gotten too close to someone, could read the signs, could see it in the mirror he held up between them. The only other sign more telling was when he realised he was being *himself* around someone he liked.

Until now Will hadn't realised there was another step, a further signal. Until now he hadn't realised he was capable of a trust so deep it allowed for a full adaptation. A silken stream trickled down into his core as he stood in Chilton's office, observed by peeved little eyes and a stern countenance. Will felt surprisingly giddy as he assimilated these new reactions, these new feelings and these new entertainments.

It was as he allowed himself to stand as Hannibal would, tall and effortlessly elegant, and speak as he would, with a becoming arrogance, that Will realised what it might be for him to be in love. Not how he had heard it described by others, nor in film nor written on the page, but his own idea of what it was to trust someone so completely that it actually felt foolish.

"Is there a *good* reason?" Will asked, hands in pockets, back to the light from the window; he enjoyed seeing Chilton squint, "Lawrence Wells surely gets a lot of visitors."

"Not as many as you would think," Chilton disagreed, "he's not much of a talker. Or a react-er, for that matter."

Will could tell Chilton was stalling. To what end he couldn't be entirely sure but Will had to remind himself that figuring that out wasn't his focus. As much as he was enjoying watching

the man squirm his original purpose was far more worthy. He shirked up his eyebrows and shook his head, making Chilton frown.

“Really Fredrick, can I call you Fredrick?” Will asked, suppressing a smile when Chilton opened his mouth to reply only to be overruled as Will continued, “I didn’t think you had it in you to be this blinded by egotism. I need to speak to him, it’s important beyond the idea of simple academic study.”

“Don’t you think I would value *any* opinion on someone I was unable to...having trouble with?” Chilton corrected himself; *Not on your life*, Will wanted to say, “But right now Wells is in an unstable state for which I think an interrogation would be a serious miscalculation.”

“Not an interrogation,” Will clarified for the second time, “I just want to talk to him. He doesn’t even have to reply.”

The insinuation was clear. I don’t have to hear his words to read him, Will was saying, unlike you. The sour twist to Chilton’s mouth, which he smoothed out with a darting tongue to wet his lips, sent a positive warmth along Will’s spine. For a moment he wondered to himself if this was how Hannibal felt on a daily basis; high on superiority. He knew he couldn’t get a taste for it but, right now, it was an enjoyable distraction coupled with a useful tool.

“I don’t like surprises, Mr. Graham,” Chilton stood, pulling at his suit jacket.

“I did write ahead,” Will said, “and you granted me an audience.”

“Do you have to be so condescending?” Chilton snapped out before reigning himself back in; even he seemed surprised by his own snappish behaviour. Will knew Chilton would never have said as such to Lecter. Hannibal gave off a heady scent of power which Will knew he did not have. Still, it was fascinating to watch the man scrabble backwards in order to regain control, “apologies. I have had a stressful day and this *suddenness* isn’t helping matters.”

“Then why not get me out of your way,” Will suggested, “and let me see Wells for, say, half an hour?”

“I can give you ten minutes,” Chilton said.

“Do I really have to haggle with you? Now who’s being condescending.”

“You know I think I might have preferred you when you were unapproachable,” Chilton muttered under his breath as he walked towards the door, “this is just uncivilised.”

Will didn’t push his luck, even if the thrill of his act was still hot in his veins. He followed Chilton out into the starkly shining corridor, hoping that his assumption was correct and that Chilton had given in. Perhaps the offer of leaving once I’m done cracked him, Will thought. If I were him I’d want rid of me too.

The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane had the feel of a well ordered madhouse, as it should Will thought. The elevator rode with a seamlessness that belied the

reasoning behind his visit. The day watchman, an older black man with greying hair, clocked them with sharp eyes that softened slightly on recognising Chilton.

“Give Mr. Graham a temp pass, Billy,” Chilton said stiffly, “and have a chair taken along to Wells.”

Billy did not reply, merely nodded. Chilton refused to give Will any more of his breath, it seemed, and turned to leave as soon as his orders had been given. Back to his snooping perch, Will thought dismissively. It’ll be better if Wells doesn’t talk, he thought vindictively, make Chilton work for his damned reward.

The doors opened with a heavy, ringing buzz of the lock disengaging. They appeared as handles on a funeral casket, swinging closed with a clicking finality that Will did not enjoy. A seamless corridor, mockingly white he thought, with no loose threads visible. Billy, walking by his side, began to talk.

“I understand you’ve been here before,” Billy said, “but I’d like to make the rules clear.”

Will nodded, taking off his jacket and putting it over his arm as Billy rattled off the regulations (*...do not hand him anything sharp, no metal or plastic. Paper is allowed but no staples or paperclips. Do not approach him under any circumstances*...) and simultaneously revised his notes on Wells in his head. Another porter, tall and thin with a pockmarked face just as long as his lanky body, walked past them with a chair and entered the fourth door on the left. Billy stopped him outside as the other porter re-emerged.

“Do you understand what I have told you?” Billy asked.

“Yes,” Will nodded.

“When you’re done ring the buzzer by the door and I’ll come let you out.”

Come let you out. He stepped into Wells' room and the door locked behind him. Will found it so frighteningly close to being trapped that it was almost funny. Almost.

Wells was sitting on a long bed that was riveted to the floor and wall. A small sink and toilet sat in the corner, above which was an empty shelf. The white walls spoke of impersonality. Will thought it screamed of a mind willing to hide until the end of all things.

Will took a seat on the folding plastic chair and set his folder on the small shelf to his right. He did not speak, just waited for Wells to acknowledge him. He was glad when his tactic bore fruit; Wells’ eyes were deeply rimmed with purple when they finally looked at him. For a few minutes they sat in a simple silence, staring. Eventually Wells smiled. Will wished that he wouldn’t.

“Here to gloat, Mr Graham?”

Well, a personal best at beating Chilton to the punch, Will thought. Wells had spoken in under five minutes. Will changed his mind; he hoped Chilton was listening.

“Not unless you’d like me to,” Will said, sitting forwards with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped loosely.

“Oh,” Wells laughed out roughly, “then you’re here at my disposal?”

“To an extent,” Will said, watching his step, “quid pro quo, Mr Wells.”

“You want my help with something?” now the laugh was enough to have Wells slap his own thigh like an old man at a bar.

Probably how he drew his victims in, Will thought, with that indiscernible, affable quality. Watch them smile and flutter, eager to please, even when their eyes opened in pain and their mouths yawned like chasms; little butterflies, all together in a net. Will blinked when he realised he was looking in the wrong direction, but when he looked back Wells didn’t seem discouraged or annoyed. He looked intrigued.

“Lost in thought?” Wells asked.

“Something like that,” Will said, skirting the issue but not lying about it; he was worried Wells would be able to tell if he lied, “I have an itch I can’t scratch about your case, Mr Wells.”

“Oh?” Wells asked, eyes flicking to the folder at Will’s side.

“Yes,” Will said, “I can see your design. It’s impressively built. Noticeable precision meted out with a sense of duty. A love in the way you tied the rope,” Will could hear his voice changing, slowing; he cleared his throat, “you’re a talented knotsmith.”

Wells watched him silently, studying him. Will felt like getting up and leaving, while another part of him wished to stay and continue this dance. That part won out, as much as it scared him. He knew why Wells was able to appreciate what should have been obvious flattery; he knew Wells could hear the genuine respect in his words. He hoped that allowing for a slip would be enough to calm the man’s standoffishness. Will didn’t want to stay there too long, in his mind with the dark cage unlocked and open. He put his hand in and closed his eyes, feeling soft fur and feathers against his palm.

“You don’t look rough enough to be a sailor,” Wells said after a short pause, “navy?”

“Fly fisher,” Will said with a smile.

“Ah,” Wells nodded, “I should have seen that. You have patience, I can see it in your eyes.”

“I guess it takes one to see one,” Will said, hoping he wasn’t pushing too far too quickly.

“The same could be said of anyone,” Wells said.

“Only you didn’t find just anyone to help you,” Will said, “did you Mr Wells.”

The pause was terse this time. Wells’ eyes were naturally piercing, looking more through than at whatever they fell upon. But they fell upon Will, and they looked *at* him. They fell

upon him and stayed there as if hoping to draw out what they wanted. Will refused to react. He'd had worse, even if that didn't make enduring it any more enjoyable. Will waited another minute before realising he might have gone too fast. The only way left was forwards as backtracking now seemed like a terrible idea. Will picked up his folder but did not open it, just held it as a peace offering would be held; with delicacy.

"Your design has a poetic streak," Will said, "a tower built to honour, a testament to the futility of the search. The futility of a legacy, Mr Wells?"

No reply, just that continued, piercing stare which Will refused to meet with his own. He took a deep breath in through his nose, hand flat out on the brown folder, and spoke softly.

"There they stood, ranged along the hillsides, met to view the last of me, a living frame for one more picture," Will said with little poetic cadence, "in a sheet of flame I saw them and I knew them all."

He knew it had worked as soon as the self satisfied smile returned to Wells' mouth. The older man's face crinkled like kid gloves, all soft folds. It hadn't taken Will long, on a second visit to Wells' house before the bailiff came to clean it out, to recognise the man's penchant for poetry. Browning had stood out. Four copies of the complete works and one of *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* in a slim, single volume. Will would have called it an educated guess, Jack would have called it his miracle working; but Will didn't want to think about that right now.

"You know your Browning," Wells said, "or did you rehearse that just for me?"

"I studied it at high school," Will explained vaguely.

"And yet you must be, what, early thirties?" Wells conjectured.

"Thirty six," Will corrected, taking a breath before explaining, "I have an eidetic memory. Makes it difficult to forget things learned by rote."

"Well, I would ask how you knew I appreciate his poetry but I'm beginning to think you actually *look,*" Wells said, "unlike the others."

"I see," Will countered, sitting back in the uncomfortable chair, "sometimes that's better than just looking."

"Yes," Wells' smile was beginning to become disturbing and Will disliked it; it was trying to breed familiarity, "it certainly is. You are a very interesting young man, Mr Graham. Or Will, can I call you Will?"

"I don't see why not," Will said, even as he wanted to say *no, not at all, not ever*, "Lawrence?"

"Now I'm on a first name basis with the man who put me in here," Wells said, nodding his approval of Will's question, "what a predicament."

“But not just with me, surely,” Will said, opening the folder and pulling out photographs of the totem, all angles and all heights, looking at them lazily, “Roland didn’t walk to the dark tower alone after all. I’ve been wondering about that itch, wondering if you had a guide yourself.”

Flat palms tapped out a rhythm on blue clad thighs. Will watched as Wells stared off into a distance past the wall which his eyes watched and flapped his hands once more in a tight flurry of slaps. He pulled in his lips and sighed through his nose. Eventually Wells stood up on shaky legs, walking to the slim white bars of the cell door. He took hold of them with gnarled hands that trembled lightly. Another silence brewed, only this one tellingly flavoured with something akin to resignation.

“My first thought was,” Wells began slowly, “he lied in every word...”

“That hoary cripple,” Will continued when it became apparent it was what the man expected, “with malicious eye askance to watch the working of his lie on mine, and mouth scarce able to afford suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.”

Wells seemed to enjoy the recitation, even if Will put no effort into its rhythm. Will was beginning to wonder if the man's early onset dementia was as bad as he had thought, or if the deeply ingrained poetry was simply stuck to Wells' mind, unable to crumble free. The man seemed far more lucid here in his cell than he had before. Will tried to analyse the lines heuristically as he spoke them, difficult to do while trying his best to recall the words flawlessly, lest he lost Wells’ attention. The man was smiling once more when Will finally managed to meet his eyes. Will lasted all of five seconds before he had to look away, listening to a throaty chuckle.

“Such a shy boy,” Wells said, “I think you might be a man to like Will.”

“Then why don’t you tell me who helped lead you to your grail, Lawrence?” Will asked.

“Because I’d hate to see you left mangled,” Wells said, making Will swallow involuntarily at the sudden bluntness of the man’s words, “or myself for that matter. One must be wicked to deserve such pain. Are you a wicked man, Will?”

“Can anyone really claim innocence anymore?” Will asked while he collected his thoughts.

“No,” Wells said, nodding as his eyes slipped down to the open folder in Will’s hands, the photographs there, “I suppose everyone is so petty yet so spiteful.”

Will recognised the words from the twentieth stanza, wondering if Wells was trying to covertly put across some sort of meaning; *the river which had done them all the wrong*. A stream sunken with death, in which corpses lie. Will shook his head, refusing to get caught up in the man’s mind games.

“Then you should know that I have no innocence left to take,” Will said, knowing he was being reckless with the truth but needing to know*, needing to know* if he was right, if the

smoky rabbit that danced in his vision was real or imagined, “would you give me a name then?”

“...May I see the photographs?” Wells said after a moment’s hesitation.

Will stood and approached the bars, pulling out the large metal tray and placing the folder inside before pushing it closed. Wells picked it up, placing the photographs on the small bed and looking down at them with a loving gleam in his cold eyes. Will assumed he didn’t want to hold them, probably couldn’t in his shaking hands.

“And I’d like some books,” Wells said, making Will’s ears perk up further; he recognised a deal when he heard one, “maybe you could get those for me, Will?”

“I can speak to Chilton,” Will said, staying vague.

“That seems like a bit of a lacklustre promise,” the man said, “considering the juicy morsel I can give you in return. I don’t like putting myself in danger Will. Quid pro quo.”

Standing from the chair Will pressed the buzzer beside the door. Wells was watching him expectantly.

“You can keep those, just for now,” Will said, hating the idea that he was giving the man something with which to keep the torture fresh, “I’ll speak to Chilton.”

Just as the door’s electronic lock clicked Wells opened his mouth and spoke.

“The great black bird follows him,” Wells said, his face blank, seeming suddenly years older than he had while smiling his sinister smile, “a guide, you said Will. Perhaps you might wish not to look this time, or *see*.”

His footsteps seemed louder on the way back out, more pronounced. He felt cold and put on his jacket, covering the rising goose bumps on his arms. He recalled the line: *A great black bird, Apollyon’s bosom friend*. Will recalled his father’s bible, the name sticking. An ancient Hebrew name for Abbadon, an angel of destruction at the head of an army of locusts, or perhaps an avenging angel doing god’s work. Either way the symbolism was secondary. As far as he was concerned he had been given the key to the puzzle: confirmation, no matter how cryptic. There was a second killer, a second pair of inimitable hands, *a guide* who saw the beauty in other’s creations.

The Copycat, Will thought, let’s start calling him what he is. He returned his temporary pass to Billy and thanked him before taking the elevator back up to the ground floor. There was no second killer because the Copycat was him and he was the Copycat. Someone who not only enjoyed the artistry but thought he was elevated above it, could surpass it or even bring it to new heights; closer to God, Will wondered. Wells had seemed to think of the man as that; Apollyon, an angel of destruction.

Will would find him, he always did in the end. A man that inspired loyalty, as Wells hadn’t given him anything further than confirmation of his existence, and also fear, as Wells also

seemed to think that he was in danger of the man's wrath even within this high security prison. The thought gave Will pause.

Just not enough to stop.

The cafeteria was bright and loud with a mixture of background chatter and cutlery hitting plates. It was a long room with a low feel to it, bright strip lights and faux wooden tables, with bright steel food displays and uncomfortable plastic chairs. Trainees and agents alike tended to gather here when the respective groups wanted away from their delineated areas. It made for an enjoyably incongruous mix, Will found, in which he was normally spared interaction.

Will wasn't hungry but he needed coffee and the break room had been out. He ordered, took his milky coffee back to one of the free tables and sat down, taking a sip and grimacing at the chalkiness. Too much milk. There always was.

"Hey."

Will looked up to find Beverly standing beside him, similar cup of milky coffee in her hand and a sandwich in the other.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked.

"No, of course not," Will shook his head, "help yourself."

"Thanks," she said, seeming relieved to be off of her feet, "damn I miss upstairs' coffee already."

"Yeah, we seem to be out a lot this past week," Will said just to pass the time.

"It's Brian," Beverly said tiredly, leaning her elbows on the table and sipping her coffee, "he guzzles the damn stuff. Surprised he can stay still with all that caffeine in him."

Will smiled. He took another drink before putting his mug down. It was quite difficult to ask, mainly because he knew how sharp Beverly was, but he gave in eventually. It had been four days since he'd seen Hannibal, what with conflicting work schedules, Will having to stay home with the dogs and Hannibal staying home with Abigail while she settled in. Will wouldn't have thought it was possible to miss someone in only four days, but he was finding out the hard way that it was.

"So," he said, "I hope Hannibal isn't stepping on too many toes."

"Actually no," Beverly said, shaking her head, "he's fine. He likes to correct Price, seems to revel in that actually, but other than that he's good. Different, but definitely a help. You were right, we needed his perspective."

"Jack said it was my idea?" Will asked in surprise.

“No,” Beverly said, smiling, “but I guessed it wasn’t his. He likes Lecter, sure, but his team is his team. He doesn’t seem the type to actively look for interlopers.”

“Mmm,” Will agreed while he took another swallow of coffee, “I guess you’re right. I’m just glad you didn’t agree with Oversights.”

“What, that you killed Bressinden because he said you cheated at a test?” Beverly said smiled, raising her eyebrows, “Will, you might say crazy things sometimes but that doesn’t make you crazy.”

“No?” Will asked.

“Really no,” Beverly said, “I mean I’ll admit you’re a subject of a lot of speculation at the bureau.”

“Speculation about what?” Will asked as if he didn’t know.

“That Jack pushed you right up to the edge and now you’re pushing yourself over,” she said, “but I don’t know, maybe you’ve found something to haul you back. You don’t seem as fragile as before.”

There was a moment’s silence in which Beverly took a bite of her sandwich, looked disappointed but then chewed and swallowed anyway. Will drank his coffee and was glad for the reprieve when it didn’t seem that she expected him to talk. His mind had been so very full lately, overrun with hooves and feathers, that he was beginning to think Jack’s words were a universal truth: ‘*You’ve made it bad enough that people are willing to believe you could, without hesitation’*.

He found himself actively anticipating his session with Hannibal the next day. There was a need to regurgitate, to spill out all of the inside thoughts clogging up his brain. Their last had been a week ago and had not been particularly successful as far as Will was concerned. Too much hesitation on his part.

He found he had been staring into the space just over Beverly’s right shoulder as he thought. When he fazed back into reality she was watching him with a small, cunning smile. He frowned, reflexively returning the smile.

“Something on my face?” he asked, touching the skin next to his mouth.

“I was just wondering,” Beverly said as she shook her head to answer his question, “who the lucky woman is.”

“The lucky woman..?” Will asked, confused.

“Yeah,” Beverly said, finishing her coffee, “the one who’s obviously managed to haul you back from the edge.”

Will nearly choked on his next mouthful, instead spitting most of it back into the cup. Beverly was laughing with a pleasant, surprised sound, her hand over her mouth as Will mopped at a stray splash on his trousers with a napkin.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, her words elongated with laughter, “I didn’t think you’d mind me- I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Will said, shaking his head and waving off her apology, “just...took me unawares.”

“Honestly Will,” she said, unable to smother her smile, “you’ve got it bad, huh?”

“I guess,” Will agreed vaguely, thinking back to his earlier musings on he and Hannibal’s growing closeness, “I would ask how you knew...” Will started but wasn’t sure where the rest of the sentence should go.

“Oh come on,” Beverly said, shaking her head, “you look like you’re getting real sleep, you’ve swapped that nasty aftershave for something expensive and you actually smile without having it dragged out of you. I’d think I was slipping if I didn’t realise you were getting laid.”

Will ducked his head, rubbing at the back of his neck. It was that obvious, was it? Hannibal had bought him the aftershave, insisted that if he was to kiss Will that his nostrils not be assaulted by the ‘ship on a bottle’ every time he wanted to do so. Only Will hadn’t realised just how much he’d changed if others were picking him up on it. He swallowed, unsure how to reply. He wasn’t built for these kinds of casual conversations about such intimate things. He hoped that he could wriggle out of it without making too much of a fool of himself.

“Well, I’m glad,” she said, “seems you took my advice with someone at least.”

“Found someone I can talk to you mean?” Will said with a half smile, “I suppose.”

“Does she like food?” Beverly asked, seeming to realise how asinine her question sounded and elaborating, “Nice food, I mean. Fancy.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Will said cautiously, unsure where this was going.

“Then you should come round for dinner some night, bring her with you,” she said, leaning back in her chair, “you’ve never met Nigel, have you? My fiancé? He’s a chef. Always dying to try out new creations but I have terrible taste. He’s always badgering me to bring someone from work, but Brian and Jimmy are always busy and Jack, well, I’d rather not bother the boss right now. So, what do you say?”

Will hoped he didn’t look as much like a deer in the headlights as he felt. He wet his lips, took a deep breath and let it out silently as his eyes roamed the surrounding area, jittery. Fucking hell, he thought, when the heck did I become the sort of person that gets asked over for dinner? Will was used to being the shy, vaguely sinister man that people avoided being in a room with alone. Not the man people chose to introduce to their fiancés. What the heck had Hannibal done to him? he thought giddily.

Beverly was eating her sandwich when he looked at her again. He wasn’t sure what to say, feeling out of his depth. As usual, his mouth ran away with him to inappropriate places in these sorts of situations.

“It’s not a woman,” he blurted out, feeling like an idiot when Beverly stopped chewing for a few seconds to stare at him before continuing.

“Really? Wow,” she said, “I wouldn’t have called that. Does he eat meat? Nigel makes a mean pork tenderloin.”

“I...” Will hesitated, unsure how to react to Beverly’s lack of reaction, “actually yeah, he does.”

“Then come over on, umm,” she looked up to the right as she counted off on her fingers, “Tuesday, yeah. Nigel’s off, I’m on a half, we’ll make a night of it and you can save me from his whining when I tell him the pork tastes like pork.”

“Ok,” Will said, feeling like a man tying himself to the tracks, “I’ll ask him.”

“Great,” Beverly said, continuing her sandwich and looking pleased with herself.

When he pulled up to the house the front door was wide open and there was dirt on the steps. Will walked inside, carefully stepping around the trail of soil, and felt suddenly worried that something had happened. Hannibal would surely never tolerate such a messy display, and in his front hall no less.

“Hannibal?” he called out; no reply, “Abigail?”

“Yeah?” came a reply from behind him.

Will turned to find Abigail walking into the house with an armful of green, leafy vegetables dripping soil from their roots onto the immaculate floor. Will stared at her, blinking.

“Hi,” he said, taking stock of the sight; she walked past him and into the kitchen, where he followed her; the counter offered a further display of cabbage, cauliflower and three sticks of rhubarb, “does Hannibal know you’re doing this?” he asked cautiously.

“He asked me to get them,” she said a touch defensively, “something about dinner for tonight.”

“Ok,” Will nodded, “did he also tell you where the broom was?”

“I’m going to clean it up,” she said brusquely, “I just thought I should get everything in first.”

“Yeah, of course,” Will couldn’t stop the smile, “sorry, it’s just I can imagine his head exploding if he saw all this,” Will gestured to the floor, the counter and then generally to Abigail’s dirt covered clothes.

He was glad when she smiled a little sheepishly in return. For a moment he’d thought she wasn’t happy to see him. Like he’d intruded. Will walked to the utility cupboard just outside the kitchen and found an array of ridiculously spotless and immaculate cleaning supplies.

“Is he in, by the way?” Will asked as Abigail washed her hands and face in the bathroom.

“No, he went out to get some ingredients,” Abigail shouted through.

“Oh,” Will said, feeling a little put out.

He looked down at his watch; ten past three. It wasn’t like Hannibal to be late for an appointment. Still, he supposed the man was probably a little preoccupied, what with his new houseguest. Will set about sweeping the dirt back out of the door, down the steps and into the small hedgerows. He was glad to find that Abigail had made a decent job of cleaning up the kitchen, even if he knew Hannibal would still find some way to make it cleaner on his return.

Will had found himself helping Abigail wash and prepare vegetables. It was a pleasantly systematic thing to do and Will enjoyed the fresh, spritzing, green smell in the air as the vegetables were rent and rinsed. He and Abigail talked briefly but, and he was glad for it, they seemed to fall into a comfortable silence after a couple of minutes. Like she was glad he was there. The thought made Will feel a lot better than he realised it would.

They were almost done by the time they heard the sound of the Bentley crunching up the gravel driveway. The front door opened and closed softly and Will looked up to find Hannibal standing in the kitchen doorway holding three well wrapped greaseproof paper packets tied with string. The man appeared to enjoy watching the scene before him, as Will pulled the leaves off of the cabbage and put them into the food waste bin and Abigail separated the baby spinach leaves from the older, tougher ones.

Will appraised his outfit, a light, sandy suit jacket over a faun sweater with shirt collar peeking out from beneath; his hair matched the casual feel, not swept back in its usual elegance, but left in a soft fall down over his left eyebrow. For a moment Will had to resist the habitual urge to greet the man with a touch considering Abigail was by the sink happily washing leaves. The feeling was almost worryingly instinctive.

“Hey,” Will said instead with a small smile.

“Hello Will,” Hannibal said, as he walked into the kitchen, opening the fridge, placing his parcels inside, “apologies for my lateness, I was detained.”

“Been to the butcher?” Will asked.

“He took his time getting me the right cut,” Hannibal said, smiling at Will as he stood back up from the fridge, closing the door, “although I did appreciate the effort. The loin blade cut of pork is a particular art. Abigail, I hope you did not take too much from the garden?”

“No,” she said, looking up eventually.

Now that Will could look at the situation obliquely, there was an odd air of tension in the kitchen, one that he hadn’t noticed at first as it had been overridden by his own anticipation. Abigail moved over to allow Will to wash his hands, passing him the hand towel.

“Thanks,” he said, suddenly feeling as if his comfortable silence had become a little prickly.

“Shall we adjourn, Will?” Hannibal said as he inspected the vegetables on the counter, running his finger over the worktop and frowning at the faint residue of brown dirt he found there, “I do not want to keep you waiting too long, and the pork will need to roast. You are staying for dinner, yes?”

“Sure,” Will nodded, hesitant on how familiar to be; of course Will was staying for dinner, when had Hannibal ever asked and not just assumed? The only factor he could think of causing this odd rift was the girl by the sink counting leaves. He put his hand on Abigail’s shoulder as he walked past, her eyes looking up to his in surprise, “you’ll be ok finishing this off on your own, kiddo?”

“Yeah,” she said, her smile somewhat stronger than before, even as her eyes were drolly unimpressed, “and I’m eighteen in two months, Will, I’m not a kid.”

“Right,” he said, smiling, “sorry. You’re all kids to us old timers.”

She let out a short laugh as he walked over to join Hannibal, cut short he thought as she turned back to her task. By the time he entered Hannibal’s consulting room he felt he was a thick mess of confusion, exhaustion and nerves. The room tended to have the effect of encouraging his inner secrets to spill out, only today he felt he had too many things weighing on his mind.

“Would you prefer to take a seat?” Hannibal asked as Will continued to stand at an indeterminate point, hovering between the door, the desk and his usual chair.

“I...” Will shook his head, “I just...has something happened between you and Abigail?”

“Nothing but a meeting of wills,” Hannibal said after a short pause.

“Did you have a fight?” Will asked, unable to imagine what Hannibal Lecter having an argument would even look like; he was amazed that the thought actually scared him on some level.

“She is an obstinate child,” Hannibal said, obviously unwilling to go into specifics, “and I feel that coddling her will only compound the issue. It is dealt with, Will. No need to worry yourself.”

“Not worried,” Will shrugged, “I just want to make sure she’s alright. She’s been through enough and...god, I don’t know. I just want you both to be happy, I guess.”

“And we will be,” Hannibal said, walking over to Will when he seemed to realise that Will wasn’t in the mood to sit, “all three of us.”

Will felt his shoulders physically relax under Hannibal’s touch, starting at his shoulder and trailing down his arm. Hannibal, he had found, did not like to mix business with pleasure, probably to do with his distaste for the unethical combination of patient and lover that Will presented to him, so the touch was a rare concession. Will thought he must look as tense as he felt if Hannibal was deigning to console him. Will allowed himself to lean into the touch.

“Is there something bothering you, Will?”

“Just a lot on my mind,” Will said, keeping his eyes on Hannibal’s chest.

“Then perhaps you would like to sit,” Hannibal suggested, “and tell me about it.”

The session was terse at first. Will felt clenched, like a fist holding something precious, unwilling to let go. It was only through endlessly patient and expert coaxing that Lecter was able to bring him down from his tightly wound state. Not that the topics chosen were designed to put him at ease.

“You must understand, Will,” Hannibal said, “that if we are to get to the root of your psychosis, I need you to go places you do not wish to visit.”

“I know,” Will said, hands clasped before him, “not that it helps.”

“One can only invite help if they are willing to share.”

“Is it possible to share when you feel so...isolated?” Will chose the word and then felt bitter about being so truthful.

“There is nothing more isolating than a mental illness,” Hannibal pointed out, watching Will for a reaction he did not give; Hannibal looked to his right for a moment, allowing Will a reprieve of eyes upon eyes, “perhaps staying in the frame of the present is unhelpful; maybe it would be prudent to regress.”

“Going to ask me to tell you about my mother?” Will asked dryly.

“Actually I was thinking of something more relevant,” Lecter said, making Will feel as if he should be raising hackles he didn’t have for lost family, “a child’s first becomings are always potent. When did you first realise it Will? Your unwanted gift?”

He knew what he was being asked, driven home by Lecter’s previous warning of treading into dark areas. Will bit at the inside of his lip and ground the flesh between his teeth. Hannibal always knew where to look in order to gain the most luscious of traumas. Should he lie? Will wondered. What would be the point? He had sworn to himself he was going to get better. If he was going to be any sort of father to Abigail, he would have to face up to the worst parts of himself at some point, pacing in their cage.

“Ten,” Will said, “I was ten,” Hannibal did not comment, merely allowed Will to continue at his own pace; the courtesy was appreciated. Will cleared his throat, “I had to go into hospital for vaccinations because I was never in school long enough to catch them there. We ended up in North Carolina for a few months and dad got some money together. He was always worried about my health so...anyway. I was given all three over a course of four weeks, by a nurse. Her name was Irene Gettler.”

“You have a good memory for names,” Hannibal commented purposefully.

“She isn’t exactly someone to forget easily.”

The memory of that hospital smell, the white sheet hanging from the ceiling, and blood and shocked eyes was always clear and crisp when he looked for it. Not that he did, hadn't in a long time. Will wet his lips, desperate to get this over and done with.

"She was a bad nurse," Will said, lips twisting wryly, "didn't exactly have the caring cause in her personality. I think she enjoyed seeing pain. Turned out afterwards that she was a bit of a sadist, lots of patients complained."

"Did she hurt you, Will?" Hannibal's dispassionate voice only highlighted the rather disassociated state Will was forcing himself into in order to relate the story at all.

"Yes," Will said softly, "she liked to miss the vein. Three or four times. I felt like a pin cushion after every visit. One time she bruised my wrist holding me still."

"You did not tell anyone?" Hannibal asked.

"I didn't feel like it was..." Will took a deep breath, "dad said it was supposed to hurt, getting injections. I didn't think it was wrong, but I, well...I think I figured it out before I even knew I had. I felt myself wondering, after a while, what it would feel like to have that satisfaction. She always seemed so prim and proper but her eyes lit up whenever she saw me behind that white curtain. I think I was fascinated, even though she horrified me.

"The last visit I didn't give her the joy," Will said, rubbing at his wrist absently, "wouldn't react. She broke the needle off under my skin, accidentally she told the doctor."

A long silence. Will felt his wrist again, as if expecting the skin to hurt. Eventually Hannibal spoke up.

"What was your response?" he asked.

"I stabbed her in the face with a nine gauge hypodermic needle," Will said bluntly.

"You knew the gauge?" Hannibal asked, the smallest of quirks to the corner of his lips.

"It was a big needle."

"I see," Hannibal said, not reacting beyond his response.

"You think it was natural, don't you," Will shook his head, "a human response to pain and a need to fight back? That's what the doctor thought. What the social worker thought."

"But not what you thought," Hannibal surmised.

"No," Will said quietly; he took a deep breath, looking down at his hands, "I remember wanting to know how it would feel to cause that pain, and whether I would feel the same as she did."

"And did you, Will?"

“No,” Will shook his head, “but then I’m not a sadist. What scared me most was that I understood it. I could see it. I could even feel it, if I allowed myself to.”

“Would you allow such a thing?” Hannibal looked curious.

“No...” Will shook his head and swallowed, “...not really. Only a few times,” he finally admitted, “But it was a powerful sort of fear that came with it. When I was in high school, we’d just moved to Georgia, one of the local meatheads took a disliking to me. I think his girlfriend liked me or something idiotic like that, not that I even knew, or cared. He came after me one night, got me behind the bike shed when I’d gone to cycle home. I broke his arm in three places.

“And the feeling, it came back. That thin, hot wiry feeling when he screamed, like pleasure only tighter. I think that’s what scared me the most. At the time I didn’t know it was just associated memory. At the time I thought maybe I was going mad.”

“Did you tell anyone about these feelings?” Hannibal asked.

“I didn’t want to be any more different than I already was,” Will shook his head to answer Hannibal’s question, “I’ve learned to compartmentalise, to stop my associations bleeding into my personal space. It’s taken a long time but I have managed to stop one biting at the other.”

“And do they bite, Will?”

“Yes,” Will said, rubbing at his face, “association is feisty. It wants to share and I can’t let it.”

A short pause in which Will began to chew at his thumb nail then felt self conscious at the telling action and stopped. Hannibal wrote something down in his leather notebook and Will looked out of the window, wondering what it might be.

“Well,” Hannibal said finally, “at least now I understand your fear of needles.”

“Ha,” Will let out a short laugh, smothering his derisive smile with incredulity, “that’s all you have to say?”

“Would you like more?” Hannibal asked, “Would you like me to tell you that you appear to be resisting and suppressing natural urges and curiosities?”

“I really wouldn’t,” Will said, pressing his lips into a tight line, “no.”

“Then, perhaps you would allow me to suggest something else instead?”

Will did not agree right away. At first he thought that Hannibal was being purposefully facetious, but once he’d tripped himself down from the angry reaction, he decided the man was probably trying to put him at ease. He nodded slowly, watching Hannibal’s every move as he walked to his desk and opened a drawer. Will tensed when the man pulled out a plastic vial, tourniquet and needle pointed sheath.

“If association is all that drives these unwanted thoughts,” Hannibal said as he walked to Will’s chair, hunkering down next to him; Will watched him like a fly watches a spider crawl

closer, “then it should be possible to overwrite them.”

“What do you mean?” Will asked, feeling as if he should be shifting back in his chair.

“I need a fresh sample anyway,” Hannibal said as he undid the tourniquet, “you’re due for a test. Roll up your sleeve.”

“Hannibal, that’s not a good idea,” Will said, irritated, “I think you’re simplifying things that shouldn’t be simplified. Again.”

“It is only a needle, Will,” Hannibal said, looking straight into his eyes, “and it is important that you understand that.”

“Tell that to the last person who tried to take my blood while I was still conscious,” Will said icily.

“Oh?” Hannibal smiled, making Will want to push him away, “how many broken bones this time?”

“Just the one,” Will said tightly.

“Jaw?”

“Nose.”

“I see,” Hannibal said, “well, then I will have to trust my reflexes, in case I am overestimating your ability to compartmentalise.”

“Really, Hannibal, I don’t want to do this. It’s not going to help.”

“Do you trust me Will?”

The question seemed incongruous but, on closer inspection, Will knew why he was being asked. He swallowed. The dream fluttered at the edge of his memory, *do you trust me Will?* It was one thing to tell himself how much he trusted Hannibal, quite another to tell the man himself. Will took a deep breath and looked straight forwards.

“Yes,” he said, “but that’s not the point.”

“Or perhaps that is exactly the point,” Hannibal said, watching with curiosity as Will began rolling up his sleeve regardless of his protests, “you associate your experience with someone you implicitly mistrusted, someone into whose twisted psyche you were able to dip your young fingers. Did the tar stick Will? I believe it did. I think, if I may posit a therapy, that a new association would benefit you greatly,” Will lifted his arm as the tourniquet was fitted and tightened, flexing his hand from fist to palm, “Allow you to remove the need to compartmentalise at all.”

Will frowned, watching Hannibal closely.

“I told you,” he said, feeling as if he was somehow having to plead his case; sight of the needle was making him feel ill, “I didn’t want the feeling it just...crept up on me. I was just a kid, Hannibal.”

“The most delicate of developmental stages,” Hannibal said, picking up the needle; Will tensed, both at the action and the implication of Hannibal’s words, “I need you to keep your eyes on mine Will.”

“This is a bad idea,” Will shook his head, his breathing speeding up.

“Calm yourself, look at me,” Hannibal said softly, scraping Will’s hectic gaze back to his calm face, “I need you to look at me.”

The old, familiar scratch of the needle was like an injection of adrenaline into his veins. Will could hear his heart thudding in his chest, feel his world crush smaller, whiter, smell the disinfectant and feel a cold hand around his wrist. *Stay here with me, do not look back.* He watched Hannibal’s mouth move but could only just hear the words. *Stop screaming, it’s not that bad*, another said, terse and annoyed, *stupid brat*. A white curtain and a jolt of feeling, sickening in his gut, twisting.

Just pull it out, *just pull it out* and see how she likes it, yeah, see how she likes it. Stupid bitch, stupid fucking bitch won’t be so happy with a needle in her eye, will she. Likes it when they squirm, don’t you, like it when they strain away but there’s nowhere to go. They need you but you hate them, you hate them even though you need them. *Will, look at me*. Can feel the fluid going in, *could feel the fluid rushing out*, wanted nothing more than to scream, *did nothing more than reach out and grab the nearest thing to hand and reach up, desperate to* see...

The hand around his arm pulled him back to reality. Will blinked his eyes and found his face wet, his arm raised in a fist, shaking and straining under Hannibal’s tight grip. The man barely seemed to register the tense, shaking arm he held with his left hand, keeping it at bay, while he filled the plastic vial through the cannula with the other. Will could feel himself shaking, his muscles taught, his breath sticking in his throat, unable to pull back from the need coursing through him.

“Don’t fight against it Will,” Hannibal’s voice was so calm, so soothing, “don’t fight against yourself,” he detached the vial but left the needle inside, making Will shake, “you can’t allow yourself to be two halves. Embrace what you need to be whole.”

“Don’t...” he whispered, breathless, “I can’t.”

“You can control it,” Hannibal said, lowering the now weak arm in his grip as Will lost the impetus to fight, the vicious thoughts still coursing through his mind; Hannibal lifted his right hand and brushed the tears from Will’s left cheek with his thumb, “I can show you how. No need to tear yourself apart. It is a piece of you as much as your eyes, you hands, your open heart. Accept yourself Will, it is the only way you will ever be free of this loathing you have for your *associations*.”

“I have to keep the walls up,” he shook his head, closing his eyes, his mind shaking with a heady cocktail of resentment and apprehension, “you don’t understand...”

“You must allow yourself to be safe in your feelings,” Hannibal said, taking his hand away from Will’s face so as to tape a small puff of cotton wool over his abused vein, removing the needle with a quick pull, “if you continue to let them bite at each other, you will never be at peace. There must be a meeting point.”

His shoulders shook. Will stared at Hannibal with hard eyes until the man frowned. He made to get up, a hand reaching out to stop him.

“Take your fucking hand off of me,” Will said coldly, so much so that he barely recognised himself.

Hannibal did not stop him as he stood, walking stiffly from the study, wiping roughly at his face. He walked out into the hall and then realised he wasn’t sure where he was going. A noise from above made him look up. Abigail looked down from the top of the stairs, over the banister, her face cautious. She pushed her hair behind her ear.

“Is everything ok?” she asked, “I heard you shouting.”

“Everything’s fine,” he said looking back down, his eyes level; *I was shouting?* he thought, *I don’t remember*.

He walked to the bathroom without another word, closing and locking the door behind him. The water was cold against his face, the skin heated and sensitive. Will rubbed his hands over the curves of his eyes, the length of his nose, down to trip off the stubble on his chin. He looked into the mirror and thought he saw a familiar stare there; only not his own. He leaned forwards, hands on the sides of the sink, and gazed into the grey there. Flat, mirror-like. Will wanted to see. *You always see*. His heart raced in his chest still, unable to slow its pace from the moment Hannibal had slid the needle into his skin.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood there but the next he knew there was a knock on the door. Will stood silently, listening.

“Will?” Hannibal’s voice, “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Will lied.

“May I come in?”

A surging want to *hurt kiss savage touch* had him flick the lock. Hannibal stepped inside smoothly, with no hurry, but with enough foresight to close the door. Will wondered absently, as he shoved the man roughly up against the wall and kissed him fiercely, if he had seen it in Will’s eyes. Will thought he had been able to see it in them, that mirror slab reflecting everything and anything.

Hannibal held him lightly by his waist even when Will tasted blood. The flavour felt wrong, clashed with the action. He pulled back, wiping his mouth, and saw the small cut on

Hannibal's curved upper lip. He stared, barely aware that his hands were shaking.

"Don't expect an apology," Will said, his voice rough, "you don't deserve it."

"No apology is necessary," Hannibal said, his grip on Will's waist tightening, "I do not do this for my own benefit."

"Could have fooled me," Will said, wanting to pull away but also wanting to remain close, pressed tightly against firm chest and thighs.

"I want only what is best for you Will," a hand appeared in Will's hair, brushing through the curls delicately; Will's mind wavered with every spiral pulled, "please understand I do not wish you any harm. Unlike Jack, I would push you higher rather than lower."

"But Jack doesn't know me like you do," Will said, "does he."

"No," Hannibal agreed, "he does not. Jack thinks of you as a fragile little teacup. To shatter at the slightest pressure, never to go back together again just right. I see you for what you are; the mongoose that goes beneath the stairs when the snake slithers by. You are no one's fool, dear Will."

For a moment he thought he might leave. Twinging in his fingers, a need to be alone. An instinct to be alone. Will closed his eyes. His instincts had always relied on being alone. Only he wasn't alone now. How to handle that? He wasn't sure.

Will rested on the knife's edge and felt himself tip, for better or for worse, forwards into Hannibal's arms. He rested his head against the man's neck, breathing in the faint scent of hot skin and musky cologne. Hands scoured deeply across his shirted back, up to his shoulder blades, holding him close.

"I won't be your fool either, Doctor Lecter," Will murmured.

"I would not dream of asking you to be so, Mister Graham," Hannibal replied, a smile in his voice.

Le Plat Principal

Chapter Notes

Title Translation
'Le Plat Principal' - 'The Main Course'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cold, hard lights of the city gave way to the encroaching darkness of the countryside. Buildings folded down, from high rises to suburban houses to industrial to nothing. At some point everything sank back into the wilderness, Will thought, enough that the untamed was never too far away. Civilisation seemed to be surrounded on all sides, constantly pushing back against its uncivilised borders. Building over the dust and dirt only seemed, to Will, like a coverall, concealer for irritated skin still itching underneath. He preferred the wilderness wild.

Will rested his head back against the car seat and licked at his lips, dried by the air conditioning. The headlights splayed out in front of them like ducks feet, jumping up over shadows and rocks as the wheels rolled.

“It seems you are not the only one with somewhere to hide away,” Hannibal said as he slowed at an intersection, putting on his right indicator; it clicked softly as he checked the road.

“Some people just don’t like city life,” Will shrugged as Hannibal pulled out, “I know I don’t. Too many voices all the time, too much noise and activity. It gets tiring.”

“I understand the appeal of the countryside,” Hannibal said, “but I myself enjoy the urban flow. It breathes life into that which otherwise would be nothing but a pretty backdrop.”

“Yeah, but you like people,” Will said as if the thought was distasteful, “take a left up here,” Hannibal slowed, “no wait, the next one.”

“I see it,” Hannibal said, “and I do enjoy the fact that you wish to label me the socialite when it was you who accepted this invitation.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Will said, realising how foolish that sounded and rephrasing, “it was an accident. She sprang it on me and I didn’t want to turn her down.”

“Really?” Hannibal asked with a small smile, seeming to enjoy watching Will when he was flustered, “you don’t seem to have a problem doing so with anyone else.”

“Yeah,” Will rubbed at his face and sighed, “you’re right, I know. I guess Beverly just...she’s nice, and she doesn’t care about gossip and rumours and, damn, any of that. She makes her

own opinions. It's something to appreciate considering how everyone else behaves in that animal house."

"I agree, from my time working with her I find she is a most delightful and pragmatic woman," Hannibal said as they began driving up a long, narrow road with houses all along the left hand side, long low bungalows with a garden out front and driveways as delineating barriers, "do you have a number?"

"She's the one with the red door," Will said, scanning them, "she said it's the only one...there, second on the left."

There was already a car in the drive, Will recognised Beverly's blue sedan, so Hannibal parked on the street. It was an odd place, this tiny piece of society with its asphalt and its streetlights and its picket fences, placed in the centre of the vast, still darkness. There was no moon out but the flat expanse seemed visible to Will as he imagined it under the noonday sun; barren and brown, littered with scrub and foxes.

Comparatively, the house seemed like a Christmas tree beside a lump of coal; bright and gaudy. Yet Will enjoyed the welcoming package it presented. Something like a haven, only not as desperate.

"I understand that you have explained the situation, Will," Hannibal said as he looked up at the house and turned off the engine, "but I do hope it will not be a problem. I would hate to ruin the appetite."

"I told you, she knows now and that's enough," Will said, unbuckling his seatbelt and reaching into the backseat for his coat and the bottle of wine Hannibal had chosen to bring; he remembered feeling incredibly embarrassed as Beverly had looked at him like he had two heads, "she said that she wouldn't say anything to Jack but if he asked..." he hesitated.

"I would not expect her to lie," Hannibal said.

"That's what I said," Will nodded stiffly.

A short, telling pause followed, which Will could tell Hannibal was analysing.

"I will not be offended," Hannibal said eventually, tipping his head slightly to the right, "if there is more."

Typical damn psychiatrist, Will thought wryly, always picking up on things left unsaid. He cleared his throat.

"Well," Will sat with his coat in his lap for a second, wondering how to phrase it, "she said she thought I was out of my mind because if Jack ever finds out we're both in serious shit, and that she never thought of me as the type to date my psychiatrist. Apparently it's tacky."

"An astute analysis," Hannibal said, even if he didn't seem entirely happy at Beverly's accuracy, "but I am not your psychiatrist."

“And I know that,” Will said quickly when the other man looked, beneath his calm shell, as if he were searching for reasons to exonerate himself, “but it’s not really that simple to everyone else.”

He took a moment before deciding it was safe enough to lighten the mood. The last thing he wanted was to eat on a miserable stomach.

“She wasn’t all negative,” he said, opening the door and hating the chill that spilled in.

“Oh?” Hannibal enquired.

“She said that I was lucky to have bagged a man with manners who can cook *and* has a great ass,” Will smirked, “apparently they tend not to go hand in hand.”

“Ah,” Hannibal’s enigmatic smile returned, “then I am, as they say, quite a catch.”

“As they say,” Will said before getting out of the car, “and don’t tell her I told you she said that.”

It was chilly, the air crisp with the last of winter’s grip, and Will pulled his coat on even though it was only a short walk to the front door. He scanned the street. The houses were neat in their row, long, dark tiled roofs and large bay windows facing a line of trees that blocked the view of the highway. They backed out onto what looked like a substantial forest of pines and alder, the leaves of the first row only just caught by the small pool of artificial light. A man made plantation of trees, Will thought as he looked at their regularity in the gloom, even as the branches reached out to create shaggy, wild shapes, distorting the neat order.

Hannibal waited for him before ringing the doorbell. Will jiggled on his feet, hands in his pockets.

“And you’re not allowed to complain, alright?” Will said, hearing sounds from within.

“I beg your pardon?” Hannibal asked.

“If I like his food,” Will said, “don’t bring it up. I wasn’t feeling well last week, alright.”

“You appear to be under the misgiving that I resent you not eating the wonderful dinner I cooked for you on Wednesday,” Hannibal said, making Will choke out a laugh, “something you appear to find amusing.”

“Sorry,” Will said, smiling broadly, “what can I say? You’re so damn passive aggressive sometimes I can’t help it.”

As such, Beverly was greeted by a smiling Will and a colder than normal Hannibal Lecter when she opened the door.

Dinner was a stilted affair. The sting of the needle had stolen the appetite from his stomach. Will picked at his food, managing a few mouthfuls of spring greens in garlic and rosemary and a bite of his roasted cauliflower steak. He didn't touch his pork, something on which Lecter did not comment but Will could tell nettled the man.

"I saw orioles in the garden," Abigail said as the silence became pronounced.

"It is early for them," Lecter said, "good weather will surely follow."

"They're good luck," Will said, spearing a spinach leaf and biting the end off; he gave Abigail a small smile, "how many did you see?"

"Two," she said, "male and female. I think he was trying to dance but there wasn't much room on the fence. She didn't look impressed."

"Stubborn mates often aren't," Lecter said, slicing a thin strip of pork, "until they realise their folly."

The comment was so barbed that Will put his cutlery down and took a long drink of elderflower cordial to fill the need to snap a reply. Abigail looked a little confused but seemed to have picked up on the tension in the room. Will wished she wouldn't. The thought of her knowing about him, about Hannibal, about him and Hannibal and everything was enough to make his already sensitive stomach flip.

He placed his glass down. The sound of distant, running water tapped at his ears. He scratched at the back of his neck, the skin there irritated and slightly damp. The sound of cutlery hitting crockery nettled his ears. Will managed another mouthful before he had to excuse himself.

"I think someone left the tap on," Will said quietly before standing up and walking out of the room; he could feel Hannibal's eyes on him as he left.

The kitchen was silent and sterile, even with dirty dishes piled neatly waiting to be washed. Will walked to the sink and frowned. Not running, not even a drip. He reached out and tightened the faucets regardless, licking his lips and shaking his head. Must have been the hot water tank coming on, water running through the pipes. Will wiped his sweaty palms down the sides of his shirt and ignored his wayward thoughts.

"Are you feeling alright?"

He turned to find Hannibal walking into the kitchen, watching him calmly.

"Yeah," he lied, nodding even as his eyes slid away to the countertop, "just not hungry. Been feeling a little off since yesterday, my stomach..."

Will cleared his throat.

"Think I must be coming down with something," he said, rubbing at his jaw, "sorry about dinner. I'm not good company tonight. Think I'll just head home."

“You are warm,” Hannibal said, after he closed the distance between them and touched the back of his hand to Will’s forehead, “You are alright to drive?”

“Oh yeah,” Will said, waving off the concern, “it’s just a bug or something. Don’t worry about it.”

“I always do,” Hannibal said, turning his hand to run his fingers down Will’s face, taking the other man by surprise.

“Says the man who almost gave me a damn panic attack earlier today,” Will countered, reaching up to removed Hannibal’s hand.

‘Panic attack’, he knew, was a very understated description of the way he had felt an hour or so before. A full on dissociative state might have been closer to the truth. Remembering made his mind feel weak; Will stopped thinking about it. Still, despite his resentment of Hannibal’s cruel-to-be-kind therapy, he continued to hold onto the man’s wrist, unable to convince himself he didn’t enjoy the feel of the smooth, even pulse under his fingertips. The rhythm was grounding.

“If you had informed me you were unwell, I would have revised such stressful treatment.”

“Well...” Will was never sure what to say to Hannibal when he was so sincere, “I’ll keep that in mind next time.”

The wrist in his loose grasp twisted, pulling back until long, chill fingers slipped around his.

“Your hands are cold,” Will said vaguely; he took a breath and looked up to find Hannibal watching him steadily, “I should get going. Your food will be freezing.”

“Let me walk you to the door.”

Will said a quick goodbye to Abigail, trying to smooth over the awkwardness his swift departure had left in its wake by keeping a smile on his face. He knew Abigail didn’t buy it, not for a second, but he appreciated that she at least pretended to.

“I have your prescription,” Hannibal said, handing him a small paper bag as they stood by the door.

“You don’t need to keep getting these delivered you know,” Will said, “I can just pick them up.”

Hannibal did not grace the suggestion with a reply. Will shook his head fondly.

“I will see you tomorrow?” Hannibal asked as Will put the new pills into the briefcase he had brought with him.

“Yeah I...,” Will said, running through his schedule quickly in his head, then stalling, “damn, wait, no I can’t. It’s assessment day tomorrow, shit how did I forget that? I’m down for running profile sims from twelve to five, then I’ll need to go over the results with Greenway. He doesn’t like leaving it, likes to get impressions while they’re fresh.”

“Perhaps another night then,” Hannibal offered.

“I’d like that,” Will said, licking his lips.

“And please do not stay working too late. If you are ill it will do you no good.”

“Yes mother,” Will couldn’t help but tease, just to watch Hannibal’s eyes narrow and chin lift with subtle indignance, “I have to go. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight Will,” Hannibal said.

It was habit more than anything, even if Will did take a small pleasure in the chaste press of lips on lips. They had fallen into it over the few weeks since their mutual attraction had been mutually acknowledged. Will would say goodnight and Hannibal would kiss him goodbye. A safe, foundational practice with a routine element which Will’s obsessive mind appreciated; but only when the routine was undisturbed. It was the sound of cutlery hitting the hardwood floor that jerked them apart. Will turned to see Abigail hurriedly picking up her knife and fork and the few scraps of food that had slipped from her plate.

“Sorry,” she said, flicking her eyes between them before hurrying to the kitchen.

Oh, Will thought, blinking rapidly, oh...fuck. Fucking god damn luck that never, ever lets up, does it. Will felt his insides knot up. He looked to Hannibal as the sounds of a sink being filled in the kitchen splashed against his calm. The man would have looked unconcerned to anyone else, but Will could see the small crinkle of annoyance at the edges of his eyes.

“It was inevitable,” Hannibal said with a soft sigh, “I shall talk to her.”

“This is just...” Will bit at his bottom lip before licking the abused flesh; he stuffed his hands in his pockets, feeling unsure and the urge to leave increasingly urgent, “should I stay?”

“I believe it would be prudent to talk this through as a family,” Hannibal said, “but not tonight. It will be simpler and less threatening if, initially, I talk to her alone.”

“Threatening?” Will scoffed, even as he knew his worry was growing, “She won’t resent this. She’s nearly an adult, she knows how the world works. She’s a smart kid, she wouldn’t...” his words faded away.

“Everything will be well,” Hannibal said, reaching out to place a steadying hand upon Will’s shoulder.

“Right,” Will swallowed; you have to trust someone, don’t you? “ok, look just...just tell her I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Hannibal frowned.

“For not telling her sooner,” Will admitted, sighing deeply, “it was stupid. I...”

Another kiss silenced him. Will closed his eyes and allowed it for all of three seconds before fear of further reproach from Abigail pulled him away. He gave Hannibal an inscrutable

stare.

"You know if I am ill," he said, needing to say anything but what he was thinking, "you're going to end up sick too."

"What can I say," Hannibal smiled, seeming glad that Will was not indulging in his neuroses, "four days is a long time to fast."

Will laughed softly, unable to stop his smile spreading. It was reassuring to know he hadn't been the only one counting days.

Light against water. Shining, curving. His father had taught him how to fish. Will had taught himself how to get away from his father's life. *Scintillate*: give off flashes of light; sparkle. Boatyard to boatyard, cleaning up after messes, doing the work when dad was too drunk to, then books and books and school and university and gone. *Lambent*: lit up or flickering with a soft glow. Two months after Will left Russell Graham was dead. Massive heart attack.

The river was a safe place, somewhere he could go to be at peace. Somewhere he could remember better times. Will smiled as he flicked the wire back, sailing up, over, curving through the air like a swan's neck.

"You have to do it like this," he said, showing her, "it's all in the wrist. Get the momentum going."

She stood with the flow rushing around her legs. The water broke into rivulets. She smiled, teeth flashing. The trees waved with her hair.

"It's different from hunting," she said, "but it's the same. You have to wait for the right moment, only here you don't get to choose."

"Choose what?" he asked as he stood behind her, looking down the river towards the bright sun, the water burbling and dancing; *effervesce*: 1. give off bubbles; fizzy 2. lively and enthusiastic. Abigail laughed and Will felt it as a thrill.

"Your target," another said.

Danger: the possibility of suffering harm or something unpleasant happening. Will turned to the bank. Hannibal stood, hands in pockets, looking downstream. Will stared at him.

"It's all the luck of the draw," Will said.

"I do not believe in luck," Hannibal replied, smiling.

The sound of water *erupted:* to break out suddenly, and Will turned to *see*: the act of understanding, Will, the act of knowing yourself. The fishing wire tensed as the victim thrashed. Birds gushed from the trees and the sky darkened with wings. As he watched the

great stag reared from the water, struggling, braying with a scream, the wire tangled in its fine antlers.

“Abigail,” Will said.

She grinned, tightening the reel, pulling in hooves and feathers closer as the stag thrashed and fought.

“Abigail,” he said again, louder, panicking.

Closer, enough to feel the water against his skin, *drip drip drip*, and see the fear in the stag’s eyes. It bleated out a cry, shifting to a deep, guttural groan.

“Let it go,” he shouted, as the stag reared up before them, hooves pawing at the air over their heads, “no, *don’t*!”

Everything fell *still*: 1.not moving 2. not fizzy 3. a state of deep calm. The stag snorted, its shaggy coat matted with water. Will stared into its eyes, dark, deeply black. It seemed to him, in that moment, inequitably sad.

He watched as Abigail reached up to feel the antlers, sliding her hands over the smooth, white bone. Will wanted her to stop, he couldn’t stand to watch it as she looked to them both.

“Did I lure it right dad?” she asked hopefully.

“Yes Abigail,” Will turned to see Hannibal smile, “you did.”

Will wished, as he broke his way out from beneath his light duvet, that he’d managed to wake before the end of the dream. The image jarred against his mind, was there when he closed his eyes. He rushed them open, eyelids flickering fitfully. He knew he was breathing hard and reached up with his right hand, rubbing roughly at his chest, taking deep breaths to slow his convulsing lungs back to some state of normalcy. The sound of a dog followed: yawning, then paws, then the soft *flump* as one of his pack jumped onto the bed, obviously deciding it must be morning time if Will was awake. Will reached over and turned on the bedside lamp. When he turned back he was faced with Lenny, standing right in between his splayed legs, wagging his tail and sniffing at Will’s knees. He checked the clock: five fourteen.

“Sorry Lenny,” Will reached out with an unsteady hand and stroked the dog’s head roughly, ruffling his ears, “it’s too early bud. Go back to sleep. Come on, lie down.”

He patted the bed to his left and Lenny instantly padded over, making the bed dip, and lay down on the empty side, curling up and then leaning heavily back against Will’s side. Will ran his hand across his forehead and was almost confused, in his half awake state, to find a sheen of sweat there. Definitely coming down with something, he thought with a sigh. He lay back down, turned onto his side with the solid, warm weight of Lenny at his back.

Sleep did not come easy, no matter how long he lay there. Eventually, after another half an hour, Will struggled up and walked unsteadily to the shower. The spray was disconcerting against his face, hundreds of tiny needles against his skin. By the time he was dried and

dressed, there was still another hour until his alarm even went off. Will scrubbed at the back of his neck and made himself a strong cup of coffee. When his watch alarm went off Will silenced it in a well practiced motion and retrieved the small, orange, plastic tube.

Will looked down at his palm and the small, white, round tablet stared back at him. It seemed alone without the usual host of others, the small 'five' stamped into its dusty surface was a hopeful number Will thought. I can deal with this, he told himself with an optimism he did not possess, I don't need it. It's just a crutch. Will stared at the pill and the pill stared back. As such, his optimism fell flat as he swallowed it and washed away the bitter taste from his tongue with hot coffee. The cup clacked at he put it down onto the side of the sink.

Looking up was difficult, more than it should have been. The mirror didn't mock him, it didn't point out the bags beneath his eyes or the slight slackness to his skin or the stubble that needed trimming. Instead it showed him the one thing he didn't want to see. Will wanted to lick his lips when he caught his own stare in the mirror but the action felt divorced, detached. The eyes stared back at him from the other side. He blinked but the feeling did not abate. The feeling that, even as he stared back down into the sink, those eyes still watched him.

Damn it, he thought. *Damn* it. *Bring down the barriers, make peace with your demons, open the cage and let the prowling creatures out to paw around and slice open what they wished*; Hannibal didn't know what he was asking of him. As brilliant as Will understood Lecter to be, he had seemed rather naive to him at that moment. Will didn't think the man truly understood what he was suggesting when he tried to put Will's 'association' and 'consciousness' in a room together. All Will knew, as he picked up his coffee, was that they couldn't stand side by side without blood being spilled between them. It was inevitable. It always was.

Drip drip drip.

Will checked the taps, tightening them even though no water flowed. He did not look to see if the eyes in the mirror were still watching him as he left the bathroom. He scratched the back of his neck, the skin itching, and purposefully ignored his problems. Right now, alone with all that dark fur brushing against his back and black feathers rubbing the edge of his vision, he knew he couldn't have dealt with them anyway.

The sound of dogs running around in the bedroom sounded far away as Will lay, staring upwards at the photograph he held above him. It didn't shake as he held it, didn't waver even as he tilted it away from the sunlight marring the shiny surface. He had known why he'd plucked it from the myriad of open cases on his coffee table, splayed out like insides ripped from the cases he was studying. He knew why but, in truth, knowing didn't help. In fact knowing made it worse.

Hannibal had told him to look. Will had resisted even though he knew it was a futile act. Then, sitting shaky in his living room as he poured over Wells and Budish just to take his mind away from the gloom he had found himself in, the Minnesota Shrike case had ended up in his hands. Then he'd opened it, then he'd fished out the crime scene photographs, then

he'd been unable to look away. It was as he stared at the scene, vivid in red and grey, that he wished he hadn't brought it home at all.

Blood over linoleum, up over cabinets, down over table legs. A significant set of virulent sprays on the back wall, long spatter on the work surface. The scene of gore in the Hobbs' household looked sterile without the actors at their marks, without Abigail upon the floor gasping, without Garrett in the corner grinning through his last breaths.

Will bit at the inside of his lip and closed his eyes slowly; softly at first, then with greater force, the memory crept up on him. Steady hands, shouting of voices over pleading eyes, the hot, wet, metallic spray across his face and the hot, wet, metallic spurts through his shaking fingers.

Breathe in, breathe out, in, out, shaking, shaking breaths. Stronger, more experienced hands replaced his own. He stumbled back. *See*, hissed, *you see*. Triumph. Triumph as Hobbs' eyes dulled, his grinning jaw slackened while his daughter's blood widened and widened.

Triumph that she would live and he would die, and that Will would be the one to make it happen.

The phone rang, blurting out a shrill tone and vibrating against the wooden table. Will started badly, dropping the picture which fluttered down against his face. He batted it away frantically, thinking, for an absurd moment, that it would smear blood onto his cheeks. He sat up and pushed papers aside until he found the phone, moving across the table with every ring.

"Graham," he answered automatically.

"Hey Will," a low, feathery voice said, "it's Janet from the fifth floor."

'Janet from the fifth floor', Will's go to for information, had an unfortunate voice for someone who worked at the F.B.I. and spent most of her time phoning people. Will thought she sounded like a mimicry of a phone sex line.

"Janet, hey, yeah," Will said, trying to make his voice sound less robotic.

"Thought I'd call as you're not in today but something came up," she said, "you still after the info on Wells?"

"Yes, yes I am," scrabbling for an unused bit of paper on his messy coffee table, Will felt the stirrings of memory turn to hooves pawing in his chest, "what can you give me?"

"Well, all close family members are definitely deceased," Janet said, "wife, kids, first cousins, aunts...you get the picture. Took me a while to push through into the next layer, the records are sketchy, but it looks like Wells had a second cousin, Frank Thomas, who owns a garage and towing service out in Elkridge, not far from Montgomery Woods."

"You are," Will said slowly as he wrote, "an angel Janet Parker."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Janet said, but Will could hear the smile in her voice, "here's the address. 6969 Montgomery Road, do you need the telephone?"

“No, the address is fine,” Will said, scribbling, “thanks for calling me.”

“Not a problem,” Janet said before hanging up peremptorily as she always did.

The picture was face down on the floor when Will put the phone in his pocket, a white square against the golden floorboards. Will reached down and picked it up but didn’t turn it over. Instead he stuffed it into the pile of papers on his desk and irrationally wiped his fingers on his trousers afterwards.

He showered, trimmed his stubble and tried to make himself look presentable. Will pulled at his hair as he dried it, making the curls extend out to hair that would’ve almost reached his chin if it had been straight. You need to keep on top of yourself Graham, he thought, shaking his head and letting the loose curl bounce back. No sinking down now.

Winston ran through the living room as Will sat eating a hasty lunch, chased by Pugsley, grunting out his breaths like an asthmatic steam train. He watched fondly as the small pug danced around Winston’s legs while the other dog lifted his tail and ears and pawed back. He was glad Winston had opened up, become part of the pack. When he’d first brought the dog home he was reticent, shy and only seemed to want to follow Will around like a shadow. Now he was as boisterous as any dog ought to be, as far as Will was concerned.

“Guess we’re both making progress, huh?” Will said as Winston danced past him on trotting paws.

Thoughts of progress led to thoughts of Abigail, the girl not far from his mind after reminiscences of Hobbs. Since her discovery of he and Hannibal’s relationship Will had been unable to get the notion from his mind that he was going to be abandoned again. He knew it was mainly an irrational fear, one which Hannibal himself had pulled him up on what seemed like a long time ago now. *Do you ever feel abandoned Will?* Lecter had asked him. He hadn’t known how to reply other than to deny it, even if the truth of his fear was obvious to anyone who looked closely enough, in his family past, in his nature, in his obsession with strays.

Abigail was an extension of that, he knew. A want to protect something he felt he had marred, caused to become an abandoned girl in a hostile world of eyes and accusations. When his phone had chimed two nights before and he had read the text Will wasn’t able to deny his relief.

All is well. Hannibal had brevity with words, which Will appreciated. He didn’t need to know how or why, all he needed to know was that Abigail didn’t hate him, resent him or blame him. He’d done enough to her as it was, he thought, all he wanted to do now was be a positive influence. As much as that was possible.

He wondered how long it would take her wounded life to heal, sewing wounds back together and hiding scars. Will licked egg yolk from his lip, wiping at his chin with a piece of kitchen roll. He knew Jack was still on the hunt, still looking into Hobbs’ journeys, where he had picked up his victims, his daughter’s twisted doppelgangers. He hated that it was still a threat to his life, a threat to the stability he had created and the peace they were all slowly finding for themselves. Yet more than that he hated that, in the logical, strategic, blunt part of

himself, he could follow Crawford's workings and see past them. *See* Abigail as the lure, see her as the fish sees the bobbing feathers on the water's surface.

No, he thought sternly, *no*. Abigail was a victim of Hobbs as much as he was. She needed his help, not his indictment. He doubted she had even been out of the house since she arrived at Hannibal's door, and for him the back garden didn't count.

He pulled out his phone, dialling quickly before he changed his mind.

"Doctor Lecter speaking," Hannibal answered, tone professionally cool.

"Hey, it's me," Will said.

"Ah, Will," an instant change, a warmth entering Lecter's tone which Will appreciated more than he'd ever let Hannibal know, "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Actually, I'm just about to head out, got a lot to do today, and was wondering if Abigail would like to dog-sit," Will said, "if she wants to I mean."

"I don't see why not," Hannibal said, although Will could hear a very subtle note of resistance in the man's voice, "I will find her and you can ask her yourself."

The sound of the receiver clunking against wood. Hannibal must have been in his office, Will thought as he heard smart footsteps retreating across floorboards and a door opening. He scratched at his face while he waited for Abigail, the skin tingling slightly under his nails. After another minute he heard the phone being picked up.

"Hi," she said and Will, searching her tone desperately, could hear nothing in it.

"Hey squirt," he said because he knew she good naturedly disliked his pet names, "how's it going?"

"Alright," she said, "just reading."

"Been doing that a lot this week huh?" Will asked.

"I guess," Abigail sighed, "it's kind of cold here. Didn't feel like gardening."

"Well, it's cold here too but how'd you feel about watching the dogs for me while I'm out?" Will managed to get past the small talk and ask.

"Really?" it was difficult to miss her enthusiasm, "Yeah! I mean yes, I'd love to."

"Good, I'm glad," Will smiled, "they always give me the eyes whenever I leave them on their own. Think they'd like having someone around. Look, I have to go in about twenty minutes but I'll leave the key under the doormat ok?"

"Ok," she said, "I'll go ask Hannibal if he can take me."

"Put him back on for a second would you?"

“Right.”

Will couldn’t wipe the smile off his face. The edge of the upturned picture on the coffee table, nothing but a white corner sticking out like a knife point, didn’t seem quite so vitriolic as before. Maybe, he thought, just maybe, with enough people around him willing to accept him for who he was, there would be a way for him to live with the cage open.

“I expect I am fetching my car keys,” Hannibal said when he returned to the phone.

“Thanks,” Will said softly, “you’re doing us both a favour, really.”

“You are a difficult man to refuse,” Hannibal said.

“Takes one to know one,” Will teased.

“Very true.”

Again that warmth seeped through Hannibal’s words, enough to have Will’s somewhat loose mouth run away with him. After remembering and worrying and thinking and falling-back-into and pills and sweat and waking too early and *everything*...Will couldn’t help but say it.

“You know I love you, right?”

“Of course,” Hannibal with no hesitation, his tone devoid of surprise at Will’s confession, “I would have been most disappointed if, by now, my feelings were not returned.”

“Good,” Will said, feeling a familiar flush creep up his neck, “just checking.”

“I will see you soon.”

“Actually I won’t be here when you drop Abigail off,” Will said, “but I’ll see you when you come pick her up?”

“I look forward to it.”

“Ah don’t start,” Will said diffidently, unable to stop the short laugh that escaped, “I have to go.”

“Goodbye, dear Will.”

“Bye.”

Elkridge was a quiet neighbourhood, all lawns and sprinklers Will thought as he turned off of the I-95 and into suburbia. It was low down, no tall buildings marring the landscape, deciduous trees lining the smaller streets, their still bare branches now heavy with buds waiting to blossom.

Thomas and Son's Auto Repair blended in with the pleasantry as a surprisingly clean and well kept garage, unlike most Will had seen. He pulled up and parked to the side of the building, passing an open frontage showing two men working inside on a car jacked up off its wheels. Will took his glasses off before getting out of the car; he'd found, in his younger days, that labouring men had always responded better to him without them.

The grass was tall around the garage and there was a stack of tyres up the side with an upside-down lawnmower slotted inside. Will felt for his badge and then his gun on instinct. He shouldn't be here, but he was. Jack didn't need to know.

"Hey, what can I do you for?" a large man with ornery black hair looked up as Will approached; he was tall, about six three Will calculated, and broad across the shoulders; Will couldn't help but feel small.

"I'm looking for Frank Thomas," Will said.

"Yeah?" the man said, "What for?"

"About hiring a tow truck."

"Frank doesn't hire out the truck," another man on the far side of the car stood up; a forgettable face, brown hair over pudgy cheeks, young but also old enough to know better.

"Get back to your work Earl," the tall man said sternly, making Earl duck back under the car, "sorry, we don't hire out the truck. One got totalled a few months back and now we only have one left. Can't spare it."

"I understand," Will said, fishing in his pocket; he pulled out his badge, opening it for the man to see, "but I'm afraid I still have to talk to him about hiring a tow truck."

The tall man didn't react, just took in a deep breath which he didn't noticeably expel. He turned to the younger boy and flipped the large wrench in his hand as if it were nothing but a butter knife.

"Earl, go inside and tell Frank there's someone from the F.B.I. here to see him."

"The *F.B.I*?" Earl said in what Will could believe would be a voice that wore thin on your nerves rather quickly.

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop repeating everything I say?" the tall man bit out, making Earl hurry off; he turned back to Will, "I guess you should go inside."

He didn't give any directions so Will chose the door he had seen Earl go through. Inside offered up a corridor just as clean as the work floor but dated by its mint green paint and wiry grey carpet. A prefab office, smelling of engine oil and hot metal with an underlying current of desperate, sickly air freshener. There was a pin-board on the wall with receipts, sign-in sheets and torn out pictures of naked women; just bodies, no heads. Will walked around the corner to his right, following the sound of voices, and found a partly open door. He knocked and Earl appeared, looking flustered.

“Frank says to go in.”

So Will did. Not that he got very far. Frank Thomas, Will found quickly as the tall, older, lanky man sat behind his chipped desk in his chipboard office, had the Wells family stare even if he was a second cousin. Will found he couldn’t match it, his eyes staying firmly on the man’s shoulder as he spoke and tried his best to read the man’s stony facial expressions.

“I haven’t seen Lawrence Wells since my aunt Josleen’s funeral seven years ago,” Frank said when Will pressed once more, “and even that was just to say condolences. We aren’t close.”

“You don’t have to be close to lend someone a truck,” Will said, “you just have to be family.”

“I haven’t seen him and I didn’t give him my truck,” Frank said a little louder, “I lost my last one to my son Benny, drove the damn thing into a tree four months ago. I have the paperwork. I don’t have the option of giving the other one out, even if it is family who’s asking.”

“I’ll need to take the paperwork for both trucks,” Will said, knowing he was getting nowhere talking, “mandatory checks.”

“You got a warrant?” Frank said instantly, not doing anything for Will’s confidence in him; as far as Will was concerned the man was too blunt and tightly wound not to be hiding something.

“If you don’t want to volunteer the information,” Will said, “then I can come back with one. Only that tends to make judges a mite twitchy.”

Silence. Frank rubbed his index fingers and thumbs together, staring at Will even as Will avoided it.

“You got a problem with eyes son?” he asked bluntly.

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Will said, forcing his eyes to meet Frank’s stare; Frank Thomas was obviously a confrontational man, Will knew he couldn’t back down.

“Yeah,” he said, standing up, seeming overly tall in the small office, “thought so. Here,” he opened the top drawer of a grey filling cabinet, ruffling through the folders before he pulled out a heavily stuffed poly pocket, “will you send the original’s back?”

“Of course,” Will said, taking it when it was offered, “if everything checks out.”

“Don’t see why it wouldn’t,” Frank shrugged, “good day Agent Graham.”

Will didn’t correct him. He was just glad no one seemed to have noticed that his F.B.I. ID didn’t say agent at all. He left with the packet under his arm. It wasn’t much of a victory, that he knew. Having the details of the truck would only help if someone had seen it that night in the area where the totem had been raised. A weak lead but then with Frank Thomas’s familial ties to Wells, and if they could match the tyres it was possible a judge would give them a warrant to impound the vehicle and test the paint.

Will had his hand on his car door when he was stopped.

“Hey,” a low voice hissed; Will looked up, trying not to look as startled as he felt, to see a man in his early thirties, blue overalls stained with grease, beckoning him from the back of the garage; Will looked behind him to make sure he wasn’t misunderstanding, but he was the only one there. He wasn’t sure if it was a bad idea or not, more than aware that he’d come alone, but he walked to the man regardless.

“You’re from the F.B.I.?,” the man, on closer inspection, bore a heavy resemblance to Frank Thomas; same long, gaunt face, same tapered eyes. A son, Will assumed.

“I am,” Will said.

“You were asking about the truck?” he asked.

“That’s right” refusing to give too much.

“The old man said he didn’t give it out, I guess,” the man asked, letting out a sharp sound when Will nodded.

“Well he’s a lying sack of shit,” the man said, surprising Will with the sudden vitriol; he stopped, looking around them suspiciously before continuing, “about a month ago two men came to the shop late and dad handed over the keys.”

“You’re sure it was two men?” Will felt his blood race.

“Yeah,” the man said, “I didn’t get a good look at them but...yeah. One was older, walked a bit unsteady. The other was tall, looked out of place, you know.”

“Out of place?”

“Yeah, like he was too refined to be behind the wheel of a tow truck.”

“But you didn’t see either of them, not clearly?”

“No,” the man said, sounding less passionate than before, “just from the window of the office. It was late, dark, the front lights were off. Sorry.”

“No, don’t be,” Will shook his head, his mind racing, “you’ve been a great help.”

“Well, I ain’t got no loyalty to him,” the man shrugged down into his shoulders, looking solemn, “he told you Benny trashed the last truck?”

Will nodded, frowning. He guessed this son had been eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Yeah well Benny wasn’t driving,” he said, “but he died anyway. My dad’s got a lot of shit on his plate that he needs to answer for. If you need anything, you ask me yeah? Harold Thomas.”

“Right,” Will said, not sure what to say other than, “thanks.”

Closer and closer, Will thought as he pulled out of *Thomas and Son's Auto Repair*, and closer still. The shadow of the Copycat was taking shape for the first time since he had decided the kills Jack had brought him in to investigate weren't the Chesapeake Ripper. The thrill of the chase made him tap his fingers on the wheel as he drove.

It was half six by the time he arrived home, hoping Abigail had eaten the macaroni cheese he'd left her in the fridge in case he couldn't get back in time for dinner. He'd ended up at Quantico, passing over all the information to Beverly who, in turn, gave him some information back. She and Zeller had been looking into his investigation of the wounds on Budish and were almost ninety nine percent sure, as she put it, that the wounds on Bressinden were made by the same blade; a scalpel. He'd thanked her, even if the thought made Will uneasy.

A scalpel. The Ripper's territory. He turned up the long, uneven road to his house and drove carefully in the dark. Will didn't like coincidences and a scalpel wasn't a common choice of murder weapon. It took skill, finesse. The missing lungs of Cassie Boyle and theatrical staging of her body had been what drove Jack to seek him out; the Ripper's calling card. Only Will hadn't seen the Ripper in Cassie, or Marissa or any of the other unclaimed kills so far. Instead he had seen someone else, a copier, a cipher, who only recently had begun to take shape in his mind. Now, with the missing tongue of David Bressinden and the inclusion of the Ripper's signature scalpel, insinuating surgical training, Will was beginning to wonder if the Copycat was truly honouring the design of the killers he emulated, or if he was perhaps trying to catch the eye of one very specific man.

Will jerked up the handbrake and sat for a moment, looking at his well lit house in the growing darkness. It had been twenty one months since the Ripper had left them a corpse. A long time for a fan to go without something to worship, Will thought. Was that the Copycat's idea perhaps? Lure the Ripper out with tributes? Lure him out with curiosity? Will tapped his fingers against the steering wheel again and frowned. Something didn't sit well with that. What was it he had said to Hannibal of the Copycat honouring Hobbs' kills? *That seems too servile*. It was true. There was something in the Copycat which spoke of independence, the audacity of his kills and the only recently unearthed intimacy of their staging making it difficult for Will to see him as a man with something to prove.

The Copycat was a sleek shadow, now outlined in refinement and purpose. He didn't take orders from others and the only eye he was trying to catch, as far as Will could tell, was that of the F.B.I. and the media. He liked to be seen while not being seen, but his menageries were not for the delectation of another. They were too personal. He liked to share with others, Wells, Budish, but only in as much as he could elevate their base kills to something otherworldly.

Will walked to the house with his hands in his pockets, purposefully banishing the thoughts from his mind. The last thing he needed was to have the Copycat in his head while he talked to Abigail. The thought made him feel wrong.

“Hey!” she greeted him when he knocked on the door, surrounded by pawing feet and Winston’s high pitched whines, “I was just going to take them out.”

“It’s a bit dark to go on your own,” Will admonished, even when she rolled her eyes, “come on, I’ll go with you.”

He called Hannibal to let him know he was home.

“I am just finishing dinner with a colleague,” Hannibal told him, “I will be an hour or so.”

So he and Abigail took the dogs out around the house for a stint in the long grass while the last of the light paled from the sky. She didn’t say much but Will felt she was more animated than he’d seen her in weeks. She seemed to feel a sense of freedom here that she hadn’t had at Port haven, or even at Hannibal’s home. Will thought it could perhaps just be the remembrance of her own youth, walking the wilds with her father, which perhaps made her feel a little more settled. It wasn’t a comforting thought, with his dream slithering around in the background.

“You hungry?” he asked when they returned and she helped put out dinner for the dogs.

“Starving now,” she said.

“You should have said,” he shook his head, “I’ll stick dinner on. I’m sure you’re used to gourmet fare now, but I’m afraid all I can offer is mac and cheese.”

“Suits me fine,” she said, laughing as buster jumped up at the bowl she was holding.

They ate on the couch with the TV on. It had been ten minutes into *Arsenic and Old Lace* when Will had flicked on the set, so he left it. He enjoyed hearing Abigail laugh.

“Can’t believe you’ve never seen this,” Will said, laughing as Cary Grant did a double take at what was hiding in the window box, “it’s a classic.”

“Didn’t watch many movies,” Abigail said, “had lots of books though. There was never a shortage of books.”

“Books are good too,” Will said, “but it’s difficult to share a book the way you share a movie. You must get on with Hannibal like a house on fire, I don’t think he’s ever seen a movie in his...”

“I don’t mind about you and Hannibal,” she said suddenly, making Will do a double take of his own; there was a pause while she fussed with the blanket in her lap and seemed to think about what she wanted to say, “I don’t know if he told you but...I don’t mind. I thought I should say.”

“I...” Will hesitated, thrown by the drastic change in conversation, “well I’m glad. We...we didn’t mean to hurt you, we were just a little unsure.”

“I don’t mind,” she said again, looking at him determinedly, “you’re lucky. I’m happy you’ve found someone who loves you.”

“Oh,” Will smiled involuntarily, feeling embarrassed and awkward, “well, thanks kiddo,” there was an uncertain element left hanging in the air; Will wasn’t sure but he thought it might be resentment, “there’s someone for everyone I guess, huh?”

“Not for mom,” she said offhandedly, making Will feel as if he’d been sucker punched.

He looked back to the television. The silence was broken as the TV speakers blared while Teddy blew his bugle and screamed ‘charge!’, bellowing up the stairs. A flash of memory: Mrs. Hobbs on the doorstep, dead eyes staring upwards, blood pooling around her cold hands. Will pushed his hands against the sofa cover.

“Sorry,” Abigail said eventually, “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No,” Will shook his head, “you’re right. I am lucky.”

He sat forwards, clasping his hands, so he didn’t have to see her while he thought. Blood and blood and the thick smell of gunpowder in the air, *bang! bang! bang!*, loud and down and gone. *Maybe if you’d been there five minutes earlier she’d still have a mother*. Fucking crazy, you’re fucking crazy Graham, why do you always say the same stupid shit over and over again? *You get love and she gets to watch on, but you keep her*, keep her, *keep her safe from yourself*.

“Are you ok?” Abigail asked.

“...Yeah,” he lied, blinking; Will rubbed at his eyes, “I’m sorry I couldn’t be better at this.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” she said, bringing her feet up onto the sofa and curling up, her head moving down to the arm, “it’s my fault anyway, isn’t it?”

“What?” Will said, looking to her, “No, don’t think that, don’t ever think that, ok?”

“Dad did it because he couldn’t let me go right?” she asked; he could see the sheen on her eyes from the light of the television.

“Your dad did what he did because he was insane, Abigail,” Will said, reaching out to take her hand; she didn’t pull away, “and you had nothing to do with that.”

She didn’t say anything, just closed her fingers around his. Her hand was warm.

“Is it easy?” she asked, “Being in love?”

“...I don’t know,” Will said after a pause, refusing to lie, “I wouldn’t say I’m an expert. I guess you have to figure that out for yourself. But...” he said as she looked away, pulling her gaze back, “whatever happens, whatever comes, we’re here for you, yeah? We’re not going anywhere.”

She smiled, barely but it was there. Will was counting it as a win. She swallowed conspicuously.

“Thanks,” she said softly.

“Anytime, kiddo.”

He got up to make some tea. When he returned he found Pugsley and Buster sitting to Abigail’s left and right, curled up asleep. Will sat back down, careful of Buster’s tail and felt his shoulders relax. The knock at the door only confused him because he hadn’t heard the car approach.

“My apologies for making you wait,” Hannibal said as Will ushered him in, “it is difficult to get Chilton to leave once he is entrenched.”

“Don’t worry about it, we’ve been fine,” Will said, deciding to omit he and Abigail’s talk, tagging on, “and you had Chilton for dinner again?”

“He was looking for guidance,” Hannibal said, stripping off his heavy coat and lighter under jacket, “I am not one to refuse a person in need of help.”

“Well, you’re a better man than I am,” Will said, which seemed to amuse Hannibal to no end, “want to join us? The film’s still got half an hour.”

“Will.”

Lecter had a way with intonation in the same way he had a way with brevity. When he wished to be arresting, he was arresting. Will turned back from the door.

“What?” he asked quietly, “Is everything ok?”

“May we go somewhere a bit more private?” Hannibal asked, nodding to the open door that led through to the living room where Abigail could be heard laughing softly.

When the bedroom door shut it was with an audible snap. Will turned on the bedside lamp and Hannibal hovered by the window. There was an air of stillness in the room, juxtaposed to the constant noise of the evening, whether it had been the dogs barking, the oven whirring or the television chattering. The silence disquieted him.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong or do I have to guess?” Will asked.

“The morning I found you in the snow,” Hannibal began; Will thought it sounded like the start to a fairy tale, “you told me that if anything happened which deserved your attention, I was to tell you. No secrets, I suppose was your meaning.”

“Yeah,” Will said cautiously, “I remember.”

“Two nights ago Abigail confessed to me that she was complicit in her father’s crimes,” Hannibal said so easily it was almost perfunctory.

The silence returned. Will looked at Hannibal, and Hannibal looked back, face calm. Will licked his lips and rubbed his fingers to the side of his mouth.

“Sorry...” he stopped, almost cutting the ‘y’ off the end, “two days ago? She told you...”

No. No, this wasn't it. This wasn't what he had wanted. Why did he ask? Why on earth had he asked, no *told* Hannibal to tell him if anything important like this happened again? Dear god, why had he said it?

"Oh," he said, mainly because too many words were fighting in his throat but he couldn't let any of them out.

He felt the bed beneath him and then realised he'd sat down more than he'd made a conscious effort to. It seemed like the silence had taken on a surreal quality. Were they really here? Wasn't it too quiet here to be somewhere real? The bed dipped as Hannibal sat down next to him, cold fingers sliding against his own, curling, tightening.

"Your hands are cold," Will said; his voice was blank.

"Will," Hannibal said, this time his tone opting for comfort, "do not blame her."

"How can you ask me..." he stopped, unwilling to believe what was being said.

"She was not a killer then, she *is* not a killer now," Hannibal reaffirmed, "you know she is not. She did as she did to survive."

"Don't," Will said steadily, "god *don't*. She can't...you're sure?" Hannibal nodded once, "Fuck this is crazy. This is nuts. You're making them sound like sacrifices. Abigail couldn't, she's just a kid."

It's not the first time you've seen children kill, his conscience reminded him harshly.

"You see her as a victim," Hannibal rationalised, "that is how you cope with what she has done. She is still that victim, Will, she is still the product of Garrett Jacob Hobbs' obsession."

He heard the words but could not listen to them. Will felt suddenly lost, roughly opposed to the confidence he'd had only minutes before.

"She knew," Will said as, without his consent, his mind began placing all the pieces together, "Jesus she lured those girls," he felt his hand against his mouth, rubbing at his lips roughly, "fuck. *Fuck*. Did she cut them? Did she? Did she *honour* them Hannibal? Huh? Did she pull them apart and fix the damn plumbing with them?"

"Please, do not elaborate until I give you all the details," Hannibal said reasonably.

"Don't be reasonable," Will stood, feeling his nervous energy spilling out into his voice, "don't you dare be reasonable about this. Two days? Christ Hannibal, how could you keep this to yourself for...god. Oh god, Jack. Jack's going to figure this out."

"There is a threat," Hannibal agreed, seemingly glad Will had shifted his focus to something more pressing.

"If she was the lure then she'll have been with him," Will said, mind ticking over double time, "train tickets, bus tickets, cinema tickets; wherever they chose to hunt. People will have

seen them together, Abigail and the girls and her father. She isn't safe. Jack'll figure this out, he's thorough and he smells it on her. He knew what she'd done even before..."

Even before I did. Will couldn't say it because, on some level, he knew that it was a lie. His intuition had tried to tell him. His intuition had tried to scream at him but he had ignored it because he hadn't wanted it, hadn't wanted to believe it. Hannibal was right, he wanted to see her as a victim of her father, just as he wanted to see himself in the same light. They were both products of Garret Jacob Hobbs' violence. He'd taken their innocence with a sick smile and a whispering voice.

And now they were just grubby children in the mud, parentless and squalling, marred. Will felt his hands shaking.

Oh god, Will thought, I didn't want her to be like me. If Hannibal had become his rock, Abigail had become his conscience. Will detested the thought of her being just as irreparably broken as he was.

A soft touch against the dip between his shoulder blades. Will didn't react. The touch travelled to a shoulder. Hannibal stood in his line of vision, fingers in Will's hair as he pulled him close. He couldn't help but lean into the touch, even as his spine resisted, remaining tersely straight. Hannibal seemed too calm next to Will's raging mind.

"What will you do?" Hannibal asked him.

"Don't ask me," Will said, his mind churning; his own words came back to him, said to Abigail with such conviction that he knew he'd meant them: *whatever comes, we're here for you*.

"I must," the hand at his shoulder snaked to the small of his back, while the hand in his hair slipped down to the nape of his neck, "both you and Abigail are most precious to me. I doubt I could stand to lose either of you."

"Yet you can stand our guilt," Will said, shifting himself out of the hold; he watched Hannibal, unable to calm himself at the thought, his skin itching, "no, not stand, you fucking revel in it."

"Will..." Hannibal's eyes had sharpened.

"Is that what this is?" he asked, voice raising; a dog started to bark from the next room, insistent and yapping, "We fall and then we fall further, and you're there waiting at the bottom? You can't forgive us, Hannibal, that's not how it works!"

"You are being difficult," Lecter said, "there is no need to be so."

"*Difficult*?" Will said in disbelief, the barking beginning to nip at his thin calm, "Fucking difficult, are you insane? You tell me '*all is well'* while everything is falling apart and now you're trying to say it's my fault for flying off the handle? She's not innocent, neither of us are, we both deserve what we damn well get and you can't stop that."

“Would you even let me try?” Hannibal asked.

“What does that mean?” Will asked, shaking his head defiantly; scratching began to accompany the barking, claws against wood, “What are you talking about? Don’t screw with me, I don’t think I could take it. Christ! Would someone shut that dog up!”

The door was hauled open to reveal nothing but air. Will pushed his head out into the dim corridor but nothing was there. A scampering of paws pulled his eyes back to the right and Will walked out of the room before he could stop himself. The barking started up again outside.

“Did you let the dogs out?” Will asked, voice hard, as he walked through the living room.

“No,” Abigail shook her head, looking pensive; Will wondered, guiltily, if she’d heard them shouting.

Will unlocked the front door, walked out and pulled it to behind him. The moon was only a half circle in the clear sky, small but bright amid hundreds of stars all jostling for space. The landscape looked bleak beneath its pale glow. He listened intently at first, then hopefully, then, as the sound refused to present itself, desolately.

Nothing. There was nothing there. Will hugged his arms around himself, feeling the bitter night air seep into his fingers, down the back of his shirt, cooling his heated skin. This isn’t happening, he pleaded with himself. I don’t need drugs, I’m not fucking mad, I don’t need a psychiatrist, I don’t need to be looked at like I’ve *made it bad enough that people are willing to believe you could*. Look at me like I think it’s right, like I think the killing is *right*, that I could see the beauty in it, the detail, the painstaking art of it, *god* I can’t think straight.

Will felt himself shaking as the door opened and closed behind him.

“Please, come inside.”

“I can’t,” his voice was barely there.

“You can,” Hannibal said, walking to his side but not touching; no comforting hands or warm words, just calm logic, “you merely need time to think.”

“Why do you always ask too much of me?” Will reached up to run both his hands across his scalp, gripping his hair, unable to let go.

“Because I know you are capable of so much more than you give yourself credit for,” Hannibal said.

“That’s not true,” Will said, tensing, “it’s not. I’ll break, won’t I, just like Jack thinks. If you keep pushing me I’ll snap, then what good will I be to anyone?”

“Perhaps you choose the wrong words,” Hannibal said, looking at Will with that distant hunger, “perhaps you will not break. Perhaps you will, instead, be free.”

“I don’t know,” Will shook his head, letting his hands fall, “god, I don’t know.”

The night let out a keening yowl. Will's head snapped up.

"You hear that?" he asked hopefully.

"Hear what?" Hannibal asked, looking out into the dark where Will's eyes searched.

"...nothing," Will breathed out, "it's nothing."

Silence slipped back. Hannibal shifted on his feet, clasping his hands behind his back. Will thought he saw the curtains move and wondered if Abigail was watching them.

"If you like, we can leave..." Hannibal said.

"No," Will said quickly, "I don't want you to."

"You are sure?"

"Yes I'm sure," Will said; the thought of being alone with the noises in his head was sickening, "I just...need time. I need to figure things out. I don't want you to go."

The hands returned. Will felt warm pulled against Hannibal's chest. Yet the feeling of strong arms around him chilled somewhere deep. *Trapped*. He let his head rest against a shoulder while warm words were poured into his ear.

"Then we will stay."

Morning did not roll around as a blinking alarm clock and a harsh beep. Instead morning rolled around as a pitching in his gut and stumbling feet, rushing half awake to the bathroom where he dropped to his knees by the toilet and vomited. Curling fingers clutched at his cramping stomach as he heaved. Nothing, nothing, then finally bile wretched up his oesophagus, burning.

Will sat back against the cold wall, shivering. He blinked his eyes and coughed before pulling a swathe of toilet paper from the roll and blowing his nose messily. Crawling into the shower was all he was capable of, reaching up to turned the faucet on slowly. It was bitterly cold as it began to pour, wetting his hair and night clothes. Will sat, arms around his knees, and breathed in, permeating his lungs with the smell of sick. He put his head back, catching the slowly warming water in his mouth, rinsing away the taste as much as he could. The bright light of the bathroom made him sneeze as he spat it out.

Getting up was tricky but he managed. He pushed up slowly, climbing the slippery, tiled wall, keeping his eyes on the water run floor. It was as he reached down to pull off his sodden t-shirt that strong hands appeared in his vision, gripping the hem and lifting it. Will allowed himself to be undressed and Hannibal to step into the shower beside him.

His boxers were slid down and kicked away. Will leaned against him as Hannibal lathered soap across his flushed skin and kneaded shampoo through his hair. Will stared down at the

man’s chest, the wet hair there flat against toned skin.

“Close your eyes,” Hannibal said.

When Will complied Hannibal began rinsing the soap from his hair, water pouring soap suds down over his face and neck. The night before, all heated words and insults and hate and confusion, seemed to have slid down the plughole with the rest. He tipped his head back down and breathed in. Hannibal held him upright without being asked to.

Will’s hands moved almost of his own volition, reaching up to run slowly over Hannibal’s sides, coming to rest against his hip bones. A hand returned to his hair, teasing the strands, shaking the shampoo loose before reaching down to touch his neck.

“This illness persists,” Hannibal said softly, his words mixing with the rushing water.

Will didn’t respond. He felt restless, his stomach empty but no longer twisting. He pressed his face against the wet nook of Hannibal’s long neck, breathing in the faint hint of day old cologne. His hand slid around Lecter’s hip, reaching through curled hair to press the flat of his palm against Hannibal’s already half interested cock.

A short inhale of breath. Will slid his fingers around the flesh to grip while the hands on his skin moved down his back. Hannibal’s lips bent down to kiss where his neck met his shoulder. Will let out a breath as he felt soap slicked fingers tease at him. He tightened his grip as Hannibal slid two fingers inside and crooked.

“God,” he murmured, hissing as Hannibal pushed in further, twisting his hand, "that feels good."

“You are sure?”

“Yeah,” Will murmured and tried to wake up, still half buried in a sleepy haze.

Hannibal kissed his forehead. Will muffled his moans against Hannibal’s skin, twitching with every twist of fingers. When he felt ready he pressed their erections together and stroked the rigid flesh in tandem.

“Want me?” he asked breathily.

“An absurd question,” Hannibal said, face flushed.

Will turned to press himself against the tiles, glad for the cold against his warm face even as the hot spray of water still beat against his back. He let Hannibal continue to prepare him, trying not to let it tip him over the precarious edge his fuzzed mind was wavering on. By the time he felt Lecter’s rigid cock jerk inside of him he couldn’t stop the grunt of pain or the sigh of pleasure.

“Shh,” Hannibal soothed as he pulled Will tight against his chest, away from the tiled wall; a hand reached around to take hold of his erection, the other circled around the base of his neck just above his collarbone. Hannibal began to move slowly, pressing in fully before retreating,

forcing Will's breaths out in strict huffs. Will stretched his head back, leaning against Hannibal's shoulder. Teeth found his exposed neck, scraping. Will shivered, his eyes closed.

"*Fuck*," he mumbled as Hannibal leaned in against him, pushing him forwards, and canted his hips; Will pressed his hands against the tiles and tried to push back against that hard heat but his control was slipping.

"Close?" Hannibal's voice was rough.

"Yes."

"Now?"

"*Yes*."

He came first, catching the cry in his throat, turning it into a guttural sigh. Long fingers continued to stroke as his shoulders shook, slow but persistent, until Will was forced to grab Hannibal's forearm and stop him before the sensation became unbearable, overwhelming.

"Don't," he breathed out as Hannibal continued to thrust, "it's too much."

"I like to see you lose control," Hannibal whispered, the jerking of his hips gaining momentum.

"Oh *Christ*," Will closed his eyes against the shapes dancing there; he felt Hannibal make to pull out, reaching back to grab his waist, "no, don't."

"I am..." Hannibal said urgently.

"I know," was all Will could say.

It wasn't something he'd ever experienced before, and he could not say that he found it entirely pleasant, but feeling Hannibal shiver against him, his muscles bunched tight as he crowded Will against the wall and came inside of him was something akin to a second ecstasy. Powerful arms held him bruisingly while a rush of words flowed past his ear, only one of which he caught: '*niekada*' Hannibal said again and again as he buried his face in Will's sopping hair, until he became still.

Will bit back the sound of pain as Hannibal pulled away, still holding Will's hips. Hands washed him tenderly while Hannibal moved his nose through wet curls.

"Come back to bed?" Lecter asked.

"Yeah," Will mumbled, his head flinching up as he heard the phone ring from the next room, "just a minute."

The clock beside the phone read nine thirty. Will realised he'd slept through his alarm, picking up the phone and answering.

"Graham," he said, clearing his throat.

“We’ve got a situation,” Jack’s voice, hard, toneless.

“You need me in?” Will asked, catching Hannibal’s stare.

“I need you to meet me on the road, I’ll give you the location. Gideon’s loose.”

“*What*?”

“He was being transferred,” Will could hear the sound of cars passing in the background, “apparently he was suing Chilton for bad therapy, making him think he was the Chesapeake Ripper. He killed the guard, the medic and the driver, and left us a gift.”

“I’m guessing it’s something no-one wants,” Will said.

“Not really,” Jack sighed.

Will took down the address with a hand he realised was shaking slightly. He put down the pen as he put down the phone, clenching his fingers into a fist, out to a palm.

“I have to go,” he said, picking up his towel to start drying himself vigorously.

“Something has happened?” Hannibal asked, moving to stand beside him.

“It’s Gideon,” Will said, “he escaped transfer. Fucking Chilton never takes damn security measures *seriously*,” he added.

“I see,” Hannibal nodded once, “then you must go.”

“Yeah, he’s already killed three of Chilton’s staff,” Will said; he looked at Hannibal, watching him as if it were simply a normal Sunday morning and Will was off to get the morning paper. Will put down his towel and reached up, pulling the man in for a soft kiss. Lecter opened his eyes slowly as they parted, “you’ll take Abigail home and keep her inside, yeah?”

“Are we in danger?” Hannibal asked, though he seemed to find the concept amusing.

“The man thinks he’s the Chesapeake Ripper, Hannibal,” Will said with no trace of humour, “and he doesn’t like psychiatrists.”

“But he is not the Chesapeake Ripper,” Hannibal said, “you said so yourself.”

“He’s not clever enough,” Will shrugged, noting Hannibal’s smile twitch higher, “but being and thinking are close enough for me. Just be careful alright?”

“As I have told you before,” Hannibal said, “you are a difficult man to refuse, Will Graham.”

“Can you feed the dogs for me?”

“Of course.”

Will dried and dressed himself and, before he left, sneaked into the living room where he found Abigail asleep in the sleeping bag he had given her the night before. Pugsley was curled up by her knees, snoring. Will looked down at her face, half hidden beneath her hair and the puffy, red material. He leaned down and placed a soft kiss against her forehead before leaving.

The sleeping bag sat half unfurled from where Will had taken it from its bag. She had heard him shouting, she had known as soon as he tried to wish her goodnight. Words had flowed out of her like a river: he made me do it, he picked them and he made me. Mom never knew. They liked me, they trusted me and he killed them. *Will held Abigail in his arms as she wept, her hands curled tightly into his jumper.*

"I just wanted it to stop," she choked out around gulping tears, "I just wanted it to stop*."*

"It's alright," Will said, over and over again until he wasn't sure if he was trying to convince Abigail or himself, "everything's going to be alright. I promise."

Chapter End Notes

"niekada" translates out to 'never'

Also, if you haven't seen 'Arsenic and Old Lace' I highly recommend it, it's a hilarious film. And for those who have seen it you will understand why it is rather disturbing that Abigail could laugh at it at all...

Raisonnement Franchement Psychotique (la deuxième partie)

Chapter Summary

In which things go very wrong, very fast. I have changed some things up for my own purposes in this chapter, so some details are different.
Please feel free to leave Will hugs. I think he's going to need them.

Title Translation: 'Frankly Psychotic Thinking (part two)'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Are you my protective custody?”

Alana looked curiously amused as she stood in the dimly lit lecture hall. Will watched her sort the papers on the desk before the monitor. The room stood like a tomb. Airy and silent. Will touched his face and blinked. His skin felt hot and detached under his fingers, like it was someone else’s hand. He shook his head.

Focus

“You heard?” he asked quickly.

“I heard I get an armed escort until Gideon is apprehended.”

“You’ll have a real F.B.I. agent,” Will said, smiling, “not a teacher with a temporary badge.”

“Too bad,” she said, flipping her jacket over her arms; when he looked her in the eye she held his gaze, “would have been nice to cozy up with your dogs in front of the space heater.”

“Maybe I can lend you a couple,” Will said; the flirtation was obvious and he tried to avoid it. It made his heart feel uneasy, “I definitely have enough to spare.”

“You sure do,” she said, nodding; Will thought she looked derailed by his detour.

They walked to the car park. It wasn't late but the heavy clouds made the sky seem dark.

“You’ll come with me?”

“Hmm?” he asked, “Sorry, I was miles away.”

“I asked if you were coming with me.”

“I can take you to the safe house,” he said, “if you want. I can’t stay.”

“I know. I’d just feel better if someone I knew took me there. Knew where I was.”

“We know where you are Alana,” Will said, blinking under the strip lights and hating the nip the brightness caused in his head, “don’t worry.”

She had worried. He could tell. When it came time for her to leave she was still nervous. Will sat in the passenger seat of her car while she drove, the escort following behind.

“They’re going to kill Gideon,” she asked out of the blue as they stopped in traffic, “aren’t they.”

“Whatever happens to him has nothing to do with you,” Will said, “don’t blame yourself.”

“How can I not blame myself when even Gideon isn’t completely responsible for his actions? He was subjected to outside influence. Chilton convinced him of who he isn’t, and now he’s living out that fantasy.”

“And Chilton’s dull witted therapy isn’t your fault. The man’s an A-grade moron.”

“But me telling Gideon he’s not in a state of mind to know who he is,” she said, “that isn’t?”

“No,” Will said emphatically, “you told him the truth as you saw it. Chilton filled in all the gaps with what he wanted in order to give himself a nice little celebrity inmate. He’s more to blame for this mess than the Chesapeake Ripper is for giving Gideon ideas.”

Will wished he hadn’t said it because Alana couldn’t stop herself from looking momentarily stunned by his words. She covered it quickly and sprayed the windscreen with cleaner, turning on the wipers to clear the fluid and leave the glass shining. Will wished she wouldn’t try to distract herself from him.

“What do you think will happen?” she asked.

“About what?”

“Gideon’s looking for the Ripper,” she said, “what do you think will happen if he finds him?”

He didn’t want to tell her, not because he thought she wouldn’t want to hear it, but because he didn’t want to believe he knew. Yet he did. He did know. He knew how the Chesapeake Ripper would react because Will had spent far longer than he should diving into the man’s head, opening his mouth and breathing in the dark waters. Gideon thought he was the Ripper? Will had to think like the Ripper. So, when he answered Alana’s question, he knew the words sounded wrong, didn’t sound like him. Came out twisted.

“The Chesapeake Ripper will open him up and take away something precious, just like Gideon has done,” he said, unable to stop himself imagining, “Gideon took credit for his work. That’s just rude.”

No answer. Will hadn’t expected one. He knew things were sliding. He felt in his pocket for his phone. He had an overwhelming urge to call Hannibal just to hear the man’s voice. The idea itself was mollifying. He would call after they dropped off Alana.

Finally, after another fifteen minutes, the cabin came into view.

“Is this really necessary?” Alana asked, looking put out as she drove carefully along the dirt track.

“We can’t just hope it’ll all work out ok,” Will said; he looked over, finding her face set, “come on, you know better than that.”

“I do, but this just all seems so excessive to me, I can’t help it. I’ve never had someone want me dead before.”

“Lucky you,” Will smiled grimly.

They stopped by the small cabin, sitting somewhat desolately out in the countryside. Will didn’t like the look of it. Too isolated, too far out; no one to come running if you screamed for help. Still, being far out made it inaccessible. Right now he would take any positives he could get. He sat back in the car seat and licked at his lips.

“Are you ok?”

He hadn’t expected the question. He should have, with how he’d been acting, but he hadn’t. It made him want to laugh but that seemed inappropriate. In fact he was sure it would only make Alana more suspicious.

“Yeah,” he lied, wiping at his forehead; his glove came away dark with sweat, “I’m ok.”

“You don’t look it,” she said, pulling her jacket on awkwardly; she hesitated before continuing, “you’re looking in at Gideon, aren’t you.”

“Of course I’m looking at Gideon,” Will knew what she meant but shied from it.

“He thinks he’s the Chesapeake Ripper, Will.”

“Is this news?”

“Don’t get too close.”

“I’m not.”

“You want to pretend? Fine. But I can see it in your eyes.”

“I’d rather you weren’t looking,” he said stiffly.

Alana gave him an anxious look before she left the car. Will took a little longer. He didn’t need her judgement, not now, not on a case. Not while the trail was hot and people he cared about were left smoking in its wake. He didn’t have the luxury of taking the safe route, taking his time, examining each clue in turn. Will knew he had a more efficient weapon. Will knew he was that more efficient weapon.

“I’ll keep you posted,” he said after he left the car, watching the black sedan which had been following them pull up; Alana’s F.B.I. escort.

“Ok,” she said, looping the keys around her finger, “just take care of yourself. Please?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Can you be better than just fine?” she asked, a small, desperate smile pulling at her lips.

“Well, I can’t promise anything,” Will said; he hunched his shoulders and his neck twinged, a steady ache becoming present along his shoulders. He twitched his lips in a semblance of humour to cover the grimace, “how about I’ll be alright? Can we settle for alright?”

He hadn’t expected the kiss. A press of lips against lips that made Will’s stomach flip over. She had seemed sad and fraught when she’d done it. He stared at her as she pulled back, his brows drawn together.

“No need to look so surprised,” she said.

“Shouldn’t I be?”

“I guess I haven’t really been entirely forthcoming, have I.”

“That’s a nice way of putting it.”

“Well, there’s nothing like a little mortal danger to make you get your priorities in order,” she said, rubbing her hands together.

“I...” Will looked over as the agent from the other car began walking to the cabin door, “sorry. I just...look, I’d better go.”

“Right,” she said, sounding expectant, “guess I’ll see you when this is all over?”

“I’m seeing someone,” he said quickly, opening his mouth to say more but losing the impetus; he closed it shut and breathed out through his nose.

Alana looked at him, blinked once and then nodded. The awkward silence lingered. A crow began squawking in the tree above them, harsh and abrasive.

“Suppose I missed my chance,” she looked down as she said it, he could only just see her eyes; she let out a rush of air from puffed up cheeks, “messed this one up big time.”

“Alana...” he started but wasn’t sure where he was going with it.

“It’s ok. Really, it’s ok. Let’s just...leave it.”

Will left it. The silence lingered. Then Alana decided she was the one who couldn’t leave it.

“I’m glad you’re happy. You are happy, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Yeah I’m happy.”

“Good.”

“I’ll see you real soon,” he said reassuringly, reaching out an awkward hand to pat at her arm, “don’t worry. I might be bad at conversation but I’m good at my job.”

“Yeah,” she said, “I know.”

Will talked to agent Hemmingway and went over the security measures again. Hemmingway gave him the keys to the car and Will drove it back to Quantico, his head full of bad thoughts. When he pulled into the car park he sat for a moment, just thinking. He checked his watch and then he pulled out his phone.

“Hello, Lecter residence,” said a bright voice.

“Hey kid,” Will was unable to stop a smile replacing his frown, “how’s it going?”

“Hey yourself,” Abigail said, sounding happier than Will thought he might have ever heard her, “I’m good. You?”

“Up and down I guess,” he said, changing the subject quickly, “you sound like something’s up.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said excitedly, “well, Hannibal said this morning that once everything blows over with Abel Gideon, he’s going to take me hunting.”

“Really?” Will asked, feeling instinctually uneasy at the thought; he pushed the feeling down and cleared his throat, blinking his eyes as a car drove past, its headlights piercing, “I didn’t know he hunted.”

“Yeah, me neither. I bet I could teach him a few things.”

“Probably could,” Will chuckled, imagining the thought; Hannibal would not be amused, “would you do something for me? I haven’t got long, I’m at work, and I need to speak to him.”

“Yeah, of course,” she said, “I’ll see you later?”

“Sure, see you later kiddo.”

It was a full minute until the phone was picked up again.

“You never told me you enjoyed the hunt,” Will said before Hannibal got a chance to speak.

“I see Abigail has been enthusing.”

“She sounds...happy,” Will didn’t know how else to put it.

“I am glad. You, on the other hand. I sense you are off beam.”

Will swithered on being entirely candid. In the end he chose half truth over full truth.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Tell.”

“Nothing much to say,” he said, rubbing at his right temple, “Gideon’s still loose, we’ve got one dead psychiatrist and we’re no closer.”

“But there is more.”

“I feel like I’ve had the lights turned off. I’m walking around in the dark.”

“Perhaps we can find the switch,” Lecter said reassuringly.

“Maybe,” Will said; he closed his eyes, “could you do me a favour?”

“Of course.”

“Just talk? For a little while? I...just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Why, I do believe you are trying to seduce me, Mr. Graham,” Hannibal played the statement amusingly straight.

“Ha,” Will barked out a laugh, “look who’s talking.”

And so Hannibal talked, about anything and everything. The leg of lamb he’d bought from the market the day before and had been marinating overnight in rosemary, garlic and olive oil; the birdhouse Abigail wanted to build for the back garden; a short spiel on an interesting article he’d read in the last issue of *The Journal of Mind and Behaviour* about an experimental method for unravelling the mind-body problem using something called ‘phenomenal judgement’. Will hadn’t understood most of it, but he knew Lecter recognised he didn’t need to. Will closed his eyes, sat back and allowed the words to flow over him. It was comforting to know he had this anchor to clutch at all times. Even more comforting to know that, even though he was falling, Lecter would always be waiting on the flat, even layer at the base of the abyss.

‘We fall and then we fall further, and you’re there waiting at the bottom?’

Will felt like he should apologise again for having shouted it at the man like it was an insult. Especially now, when it was keeping him sane.

After what must have been about seven minutes, with Will making appropriate noises here and there, he heard Hannibal ask him a direct question which he hadn’t caught. He stalled.

“Will?”

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. What did you say?”

“Well, I am glad I am not boring you.”

“You’re not boring me. I just slipped for a second. What is it?”

“I asked if you have eaten dinner.”

“It’s only five thirty,” Will said, checking his watch.

“Which is why I am asking. Am I right in assuming you haven’t eaten lunch?”

“Are you checking up on me?”

“Which means you have not, thus it seems I am right to do so. I expect you at six thirty. No later.”

“I can’t promise anything,” he said; his words echoed those he’d said to Alana and Will felt awkward, “but I’ll try.”

“I look forward to seeing you.”

The words made him feel safe even as he felt undone and vulnerable. He closed his eyes again and said the ritual goodbye, imagining the kiss that always followed.

“Bye, Hannibal.”

“Goodbye, dear Will.”

He never made it to dinner. Later he wished he had; needed someone to sit silently with him. Not an awkward silence, a companionable one. One which spoke of mutual understanding.

The sort of silence which Will had been searching for all his life.

According to the *BCMJ* only one hundred pounds per square inch of pressure was required to pierce unbroken human skin. It seemed so little compared to what Will was used to. He knew ballistic figures. The F.B.I. did the best research on the over-penetration of human and inert targets with their standard issue ten millimetre handguns. But all the way from sheer human strength to skilful cuts? One hundred pounds per square inch.

So what made each wound different? He decided to look at it scientifically. The mitigating factors. What was backing the skin? Was it bone? Fat? Muscle? The surface area creates the pressure, the push of one object against another. Skin itself is elastic and vascular. Slow pressure first causes blood to leave the area through brute force, making piercing that region difficult. So, at that point, the weapon became an important part of the dynamic. Was it sharp, a point? Was it blunt?

How many psi did it take to drive a metal pipe through a man’s hand? Lots of bones in the hand, but they were small. The palm was covered in skin that could be soft for an office worker or rough for a dock worker. How much psi to run a knife into a man’s chest? How many psi to apply a scalpel to a man’s back and delicately separate flesh from muscle? Somehow it seemed there should be a difference. An explanation.

Will looked at the figures on the journal article he was trying to get through. The *BCMJ* was always dry, difficult to read without your eyes or mind wandering at some point. Will blinked at it, trying to turn the brightness down on his laptop. He let out a frustrated sound, realising it was already at its lowest setting.

He sat cross-legged in the half-dark, the bedside lamp illuminating his bed in a pool of light. It glinted over photographs, littered over the white bedspread like stains. His laptop sat, humming to itself, on the bedside table. The fan began to whir as Will leaned back against the headboard and looked down to the abattoir of limbless, organ-less cadavers spread out before his sharp knees.

He reached out and made a space amidst the ruins. Will moved one, an enlargement of the Wound Man Jeremy Olmstead, to the left of the gap. He sat there, inert, projected from the wall on spikes of iron and steel. After Olmstead he then set about placing a string of bodies caught on celluloid; a red haired woman in Essex with her chest cavity cracked open and hollowed out; a man in Baltimore pinned to the floor with railroad spikes through his hands, his stomach and lungs gone; another with no intestines; another with no tongue and kidneys; another with the arms severed just below the shoulder; another with the tongue removed and, for humorous effect Will was sure, used as a bookmark in his bible as the corpse sat in the pews.

Three perfect sounders, the first two smaller than the third, the last ending with Olmstead's crucifixion. The Wound Man was a case of pure, aggressive, human brutality. Will remembered Jack describing it as such. Only Will could see a little more. Or maybe more than a little. The precise placement of each item, not just at entry point but at exit point. The angle had to be correct or the picture would be spoiled. The Ripper had not taken any of the tools out and tried again. Each had been driven in with a single, hard thrust. They had found no marker pen or paint or even lipstick upon the body, nothing to mark out where to put what. Yet it was a match, a perfect match, to the illustration in the medieval 'Feldtbuch der Wundartzney' Will had found in the research library. Hans von Gersdorff had been the untouchable surgeon of the sixteenth century; Will wondered if the Ripper felt a connection to him, or if it was just another glimpse into his humorous streak. Whichever, Will knew Olmstead had been done from memory. A perfect recreation.

He didn't want to admit it to himself, but the Chesapeake Ripper was a stunning piece of work. He came in like a raging tiger and went out like a housecat. One minute there, the next gone. Not a scrape of evidence left at the crime scene, not a hair, not a fibre, not a fluid, not a fingerprint. The only slip, the only incongruous event he could see, was the arm. He brought a picture of Miriam Lass's limb to join the rest, sitting like a negative next to the fully developed photographs. She was but a piece with a missing body, while the rest were bodies with pieces missing. The other bodies were to show dominance and Will also saw that in the curled, blue fingers, the puckered skin where the limb had been severed. *I am cleverer than you*, it said, *and now you'll never forget it.* She was something to taunt Jack Crawford, a constant reminder, a constant mystery. Was she alive or dead? Was she in pain or at peace?

Yet in the end all it did was prove the Ripper was a sadist, something he already knew. It was in the profile he had built months back but never felt was fully formed. Something always

felt missing. Will leaned forwards to pick up the typed sheet sitting beside the emptied out folder, pristine as the day it had been printed.

Male, middle aged, non-descript in face and clothing. Someone who fit in but didn't put themselves out for all to see; a loner. He would have a surgical background, perhaps still be practicing, probably had a job in medicine. His colleagues would either think of him as reserved or cold. He would be physically strong, perhaps heavily muscled, but wouldn't show it. He thought of himself as an esthete, a superior being to those lowly creatures whom he slaughtered (*because he is)*. He would be arrogant but also self-effacing (*a convincing monster who smiled and laughed before gutting you unawares)*. He appreciated beauty, understood his work by way of art (*you can see it too, can't you Will*) and is relentless in his pursuit of detail which would probably show through in his everyday life, in his home and in his work space (*which you can't help but admire)*. Worst of all, he has a sense of humour (*which at times has made you laugh)*.

He ignored the words, whispered as if by someone just behind his left ear. Will rubbed at his eyes, his shoulders tightening. You're looking inside, he told himself, it's always going to be darker there. You have to look. You have to. He read the profile again, remembering having written it only a few weeks after being hauled in by Crawford. Jack had demanded a profile, so Will had given him one.

His lips quirked darkly. Will remembered how he'd taken great pleasure, not long after meeting Doctor Hannibal Lecter, with his expensive, obtuse suits and his curious eyes, to place the frame of the profile around the man and size it up. He had been at loggerheads with Lecter when he'd done it; sent as a spy to keep an eye on him, Will didn't appreciate it. So the profile had fit pretty well, almost too well, until Will had got to know him. Too much empathy for a killer, too much involvement in the wider community, too much of a subtle extravert. Most significantly of all, too much real warmth hiding behind his clear eyes. He cared about Abigail. He cared about Will. That much he was sure of. There had been no space for that in his profile. On top of that Lecter had given alibis for all of the murders except three, during which he'd been at home alone.

Will put the profile down. His eyes drifted automatically to his phone. He wanted to call but it was late, after ten. He knew Hannibal would be awake but...this wasn't the time. *Trying to reassure yourself?* Will shook his head. No, that wasn't it. Will knew why he wanted to call. He felt loose, weary. Close to shatter point but unable to stop, not now, not now when Gideon was so close and yet not close enough.

Olmstead loomed large as Will picked up the picture in both hands. Gideon had been drawn in by it. Will could see why. The penetrations shouted *power* and *strength* but also *intelligence* in the way they were placed. How hard would you have to thrust a chisel to push it through flesh and muscle? Will blinked his eyes but kept them on the Wound Man. The Ripper would know, and now Gideon too. Gideon who had lost his way before finding a new one under Chilton's leadership.

Gideon who was baiting a trap which would end him if it snapped closed. Will knew it would. The Ripper wouldn't let him live. He couldn't. How would he do it? Will's mind asked before he had the chance to stop it. Imaginings formed without his consent. *Gideon*

strung from the ceiling like a marionette, the puppet that he was, feet dripping in the air with his ribcage open and hollow. Will bit his tongue in his haste to close his mouth when he found it open. He jerked at the sting of pain.

Part of him could imagine being the one to do it. *Don't look. Don't*. Would it feel the same? Hobbs had felt right, Will knew that, Budge had felt *just*, he knew that. Even Emmet Stammings wheeling Abigail out to the car, destined for the forest, had made Will's insides jump with familiar rectitude as he'd pumped a bullet into his shoulder. *Don't*.

Would Gideon feel the same? *Why are you asking this*, he thought as he shook his head, no one's shooting anyone, no one's going to die. Will thought he felt the whispering lips at his ear smile.

How would you *do it?* it asked.

A shiver of fingers up his spine. Will jerked at the feeling, breath catching in his throat. He wasn't thinking about this. He couldn't.

A gun? It asked, making Will want to turn and look, to check there truly wasn't someone there. His mind leapt at the idea like a slavering, starving dog after fresh meat. Will hauled it back.

No, too impersonal. The words made Will's skin twitch in response. He felt his chest with his hand, feeling his heart leap about beneath. The voice breathed out the next two words like a lover. *A knife?*

"A knife," Will whispered out, mimicking the voice before he knew what he was doing.

[Hands around the hilt, an unblemished blade because it would have never been used before]

Keep it close, feel the resistance of the skin. How much pressure before it breaks?

"...It feels like..." Will found himself starting, rapt, waiting for the voice to finish for him.

Like sliding into warm butter. It pours out.

[Would he be awake or asleep? Awake. Gideon wouldn't show him if he wasn't awake. Will wouldn't be able to see if his eyes were closed.]

"I would take..." he said.

His heart, he doesn't deserve it, does he? Perhaps we could have it.

"Perhaps," Will felt himself murmur, his eyes falling closed in a series of smaller and smaller blinks.

[Gideon would struggle. Will knew he would. Everyone did when faced with the end. He smiled as the blade sank in through the flesh above the man's sternum, stopping when it touched the bone. Pulling down in a sleek motion was only natural, his own eyes closing while his mouth widened to suck in the metallic tang.]

[Will opened his eyes manically and stared at his bloodied hands. Then he felt the smile. The lips. He looked up and felt Hannibal's eyes watch him as they dimmed, as his mouth slackened, as his neck loosened and head slumped to the side]

Sharp pain. His eyes flew open, his fingers instinctually rushing to his lip. Will stared at the blood there when he brought them away from the skin. Jesus, he thought as he hurried from the bed and walked to the bathroom, the photographs slipping and falling, moving on the waves of fabric. *Fuck,* what the fuck is *wrong with you*?

It wasn't just his hands that shook. His arms trembled with nerves and shock as he tried to open the bathroom cabinet. The pill bottle slipped from his hands and rattled in the sink. He grabbed it angrily and jerked it open, emptying three pills into his hand. Take them, fucking take them. Will brought his eyes up to the mirror. The mirror stared back with jealous anger and its mouth moved.

You crazy fuck. You're chasing Gideon? Gideon should be chasing you.

Will jerked away from the sink with a startled sound, the pills falling to the floor with the bottle, bouncing in a spray of white. Did I say it? He couldn't answer as his mind rushed and rushed. *Did I say it?* He grabbed at the door but missed, stumbling to one knee and cracking his elbow against the handle.

"Shit!" he cursed as he scrambled up, eyes squeezed closed, and rushed down the corridor, his knee throbbing with every step.

He didn't get far. Slumped down into a corner. Draught at his back, lifting up under his loose shirt. Will put his hands over his face. The heat built. Short breaths, in and out. One after another.

When he brought the fingers down, inch by inch, when his eyes were free, Will found a familiar stare watching him. He left his mouth covered and stared back, before putting his hands in his lap.

"Hey bud."

Winston walked forwards and sat down beside him on the floor. Will buried his hands in the dog's ruff and placed his forehead against Winston's fur. He breathed in; heady musk, warm dog and a hint of dirt. Winston let him rest there. Will felt the shaking become tremors, the tremors become twitches.

"Am I crazy boy?" he asked as he sat back.

Winston leaned in and began licking Will's face. He couldn't help but laugh, a high pitched, happy, desperate sound. It echoed oddly in the hallway.

"Nice answer," Will wasn't sure if the wetness on his face was only from Winston.

He brushed at his cheeks and stayed there, on the floor, rubbing at his elbow. Winston stayed with him.

Two days later Carson Nahn lay in the forensics lab, cosied up to Paul Carruthers like Will assumed two tongue-less corpses would. Gideon had been busy, they thought, storming about the city turning the throats of his previous psychiatrists inside out. Just like they had tried to turn Gideon inside out, Will had thought. It had all been simple with Carruthers. Carruthers made sense to Will. Pull out the lying appendage for all to see, pull it out and lay it bare.

“We found traces of chloroform on Carruthers’ clothes and in his tox screen,” Zeller was saying, “heavy dose considering there wouldn’t have been the time to inhale enough to get these results. I think he might have been made to drink it.”

“Would make sense why no one heard him scream,” Beverly said.

Nahn however, well he was something else entirely. Yet Will felt he was the only one to *see it*.

Will stood at the side of Nahn while Beverly spoke behind him, Jack, Zeller and Price all beside Carruthers’ slab. He reached out when Jack asked after Chilton, peeling back the green cloth covering Nahn’s shoulders.

"He hasn't answered his phone since yesterday," he heard Beverly say, "and apparently he didn't show up for work this morning."

"Bad signs," Jack sighed, "really bad."

Will was barely listening as he stared down at Nahn. The left arm was gone leaving an open stump below the shoulder. It had been carefully closed, flesh stitched for no reason other than to showcase the skill to do so. Will stared at it as if were smiling at him. He flicked his wary eyes to the red muscle poking through Nahn’s open throat, showing a complete frenectomy of the webbing beneath the tongue. He turned to Carruthers, leaning down to peer into the slit open throat cavity, then back to Nahn. When he stood up he realised the room was silent. He turned to find four sets of eyes watching him, some more disquieted than others.

“See something?” Jack asked, frowning.

“Nahn’s wounds are more...” *artful, impressive.* Neither would be appreciated, he searched for an appropriate word, “skilful. Look.”

He felt huddled as they closed in around him but put up with it.

“Here, on Carruthers,” Will poked his gloved hand up above Carruthers’ misplaced organ, “the tongue has been pulled through, slipped out. It’s almost coy. But on Nahn,” Will turned and walked to stand above Nahn’s head, looking down, “I mean look at it. It’s brutal but the cuts are clean, concise.”

“Even the connective tissue into the throat has been cut free and pulled out,” Price agreed, “I suppose if you look at it like that it’s a more thorough job.”

“Then if this isn’t Gideon, we’re thinking the Copycat?” Jack asked, “Freddie already described Paul Carruthers’ death in detail in her article. It would have been child’s play for the Copycat to pick it up.”

“No, that’s not it.”

Jack looked at Will sharply. Zeller and Price moved unsurely, flashing each other a glance. Beverly looked at Will with interest.

“Look at it, Jack. Really look at it. This is the Copycat, through and through. The meticulous recreation but also the elevation of the kill; not just the staging but the *theatricality* of the staging. We found Carruthers in his office, Nahn in his waiting room on a chair atop a coffee table,” Will stopped, “but the devil is in the detail.”

“It’s what’s different that’s important,” Beverly nodded.

“His arm,” Jack seemed willing to forego Will’s feverishness as long as he was going somewhere with it, “everything else is perfect, so why amputate his arm?”

“Right,” Will said, trying not to sound overly excited, “don’t you see? Abel Gideon didn’t kill this man, and neither did the Copycat.”

“Then who?” Jack asked quickly, almost cutting Will off.

“The Chesapeake Ripper,” Will said.

“That doesn’t make...” Jack started, then his eyes opened fully and he stared at Will, “Are you trying to tell me the Copycat is the Ripper?” he asked, sounding unwilling.

“Yes,” Will said, eyes lighting up, “don’t you see? I thought that the Copycat was peacocking for the Ripper, paying him tribute to lure him out. Like flowers and chocolate on a first date. But now, I mean it’s all here. The Copycat in a nutshell, but the arm is the key. He was playing a game of twin lives before. Now the Ripper has been forced to show his hand, show us who he really is.”

“And how can you be so sure this is the Ripper?” Jack asked.

“Think about it,” Will said, “Gideon’s not only a show stealer, he’s a threat. He’s trying to make the Ripper show himself, and in return the Ripper is sending us a message. He won’t risk exposure.”

“I don’t hear a reason in there,” Jack said threateningly.

“Besides the obvious signs in the surgical precision, the brutality, the staging and the blatant show of superiority,” Will said, “where’s the last time you saw a severed arm, Jack?”

Will thought Jack might have tensed but the reaction was fleeting. Jack looked down at Nahn, eyes narrowed.

“You think the Ripper is telling us how to catch Gideon.”

“I think he *wants* Gideon caught,” Will said, “and he knows how to do it. The Ripper knows that if Gideon continues he might get caught up in this manhunt too. He’s not stupid, Jack.”

“No,” Jack said, sharp gaze flicking up to Will, “he’s a psychopath telling us how to catch another psychopath.”

“You say that like I don’t know it,” Will said, his own barriers coming down.

“Then maybe you could act like it,” Jack said, “I don’t need to tell you not to praise the god damn Chesapeake Ripper in my presence.”

“I’m not praising him, I was just stating a fact.”

“Then *don’t*,” Jack said seriously, poking a pointed finger towards Will’s chest; Will felt the need to grab it and do something he’d regret. His fingers twitched against the metal slab on which the body lay. Jack turned away, “alright, if this is how it’s working we’ve got no choice but to follow the trail. Let’s get prepped, we’re heading for the observatory. I need...”

The sounds of Jack ordering up a full buffet of agents, SWAT and EMTs rang past his ears. He removed his gloves, the latex snapping.

“And if he’s not there?” Will asked, cutting Jack off unwisely.

“He’ll be there,” Jack said, “he wants us to see what he’s done.”

“He’s spent the last two years becoming the Ripper, Jack. He’ll know what I know. That the Ripper wants him gone.”

“Then we go now, before he gets a *chance* to run. Now, people!”

Will watched him rally the troops and shook his head. Things weren’t going to go well. He shook his head again, rubbing at his right temple. This wasn’t going to be straightforward, he knew that. Something was going to have to give.

By the time he had figured out Gideon had been given the address of Alana’s safe house, he was so deeply entrenched in the Ripper that one half of him, calm and collected, couldn’t understand the sheer urgency of the other half. Nothing was left but analytical logic battling raw, hedonistic brutality.

Hannibal had driven him. Will had begged and Hannibal had given in. Alana was not alone at the safe house. Will remembered the agent with her as Hannibal brought them to a halt outside the cabin. Will jumped out, stumbling on the dark, uneven ground. He heard Hannibal behind him, closing the car door. *How can he take the time?* Will thought. He couldn’t focus on that, he couldn’t see further than the light pouring out onto the last of the snow still stranded out here in the countryside. Will felt like a furnace against the cold, his pours streaming as he ran for the door.

“Check around back,” he shouted to Hannibal.

The door wasn’t locked. Will turned the handle and reached for his gun. His fingers clasped at nothing as the door opened and light poured out. *No fucking gun*, he thought wildly, *you* idiot. The scene, when the door swung open, was entirely incongruous to the domestic setting.

He was greeted by Gideon, standing unconcernedly in plain sight, blood streaked up the walls about him. Hemmingway was flopped near the door, his throat cut messily across and down onto his chest. Will stared. Gideon stared back with mild surprise, even as he held the scalpel in his hands. Alana was slumped in a chair before him, arms bound, hair falling over her face as her head lolled.

There was no question as to what would happen next. Will ran forwards, avoiding the slash he was sure would be coming. It had. Will only just escaped the scalpel, grabbing Gideon’s wrist with both hands and slamming it into the wall once, Gideon’s other hand came up to his throat, twice, it tried to squeeze, three times and the silver shimmer of metal dropped from his grip. The scalpel fell to the floor with a tinkle and jumped under the fridge.

The hand at his throat was efficient. Gideon didn’t look concerned and Will could understand that. He knew it. Felt it. The man looked calm and collected because he was. Will knew he was. He choked as a thumb was pressed against his windpipe. He let go of his wrist and put his fingers in Gideon’s eyes, pushing hard, making the man pull back with a half baked growl.

No time to recover. Gideon took him by the shoulders and slammed him against the wall. Will felt his head crack, spin. He pulled his head back and thrust forwards, connecting with Gideon’s nose. The man reeled back and Will balled his hands together, fingers meshed, and swung hard at Gideon’s face. The man faltered from the blow, but not enough. Gideon was stronger than Will had expected him to be. The punch cracked against Will’s jaw, then another to the opposite side of his face. Will stumbled back, falling against the countertop. Gideon rushed to replace his hands around Will’s throat.

It wasn’t the first time someone had tried to strangle him. New Orleans, seven years ago, a junkie going down for murdering his girlfriend. Had pushed his partner out of a window and then fought Will to the ground, all wiry, fume-fuelled strength. A spike of adrenaline, same as then, rushing, blood pumping, his hands clawing across the countertop for anything to just...

Then the pressure was gone and Gideon huffed in pain, his knees giving way and his hands letting go on instinct. Will coughed roughly, harshly, as he pushed up to see Hannibal standing in the midst of the chaos looking perfectly collected, a long piece of wood held in both hands. Gideon looked up at them from the floor where he lay, breathing heavily. He stared at Will as he rubbed his throat, then at Hannibal as he handed Will the plank of wood. Then he did the last thing Will expected. Gideon started to laugh.

“You like my work,” Gideon said as if he were noting how much they might like a meal he had prepared.

“Check on Alana,” Will said blankly as he looked at the wood in his hands; Hannibal was watching him when he looked back up, “I said check her.”

“I wouldn’t bother,” Gideon said in his usual drawl, struggling up onto his elbows, “she...”

Will already knew what Gideon had done to Carruthers. The wood swung with a reassuring weight. Long and slow on the downward slope, heavy and jarring as it connected with skin and then bone underneath. Gideon was choking as he landed on his side. Will could see the blood from his bludgeoned lips on the dull floor and breathed in deeply, rolling his shoulders back. The adrenaline was still high in his blood, puffing out into his restless muscles. He could hear an undulating, dull hum in his ears.

“Is she alive?” he asked, part of him choking on the words, the other merely curious.

“She is breathing,” Hannibal said, “but it is too shallow,” Will watched as Lecter leaned in and sniffed at Alana’s face and mouth, “I believe she has already been forced to ingest chloroform. The ambulance and Crawford are already on their way but I do not know how long she has been here.”

Will didn’t hear him. Will didn’t *want* to hear him. He was too busy leaning against the counter as the pale sound of sirens grew in the distance. He pushed his hand under his nose, rubbing at the irritated flesh. Gideon lay on the floor, breathing roughly. The air around him buzzed, darkened. Will heard the echoing sound as it approached. *Clip, clip, clip, clip.* The antlers pushed into view, emerging from the darkness above the man prone on the floor. Will could not see the stag’s eyes, just the multitude of fine, white points. Will stared, his heartbeat loud in his ears. Hannibal watched him quietly while he undid Alana’s restraints and measured her pulse with practiced fingers.

Lecter did not flinch when Will launched himself from the counter, dropped to his knees and hauled Gideon’s head from the floor by his hair. The man was still smiling through bloodied teeth. Will pulled up and cracked his head down against the floor. The feeling of hair ripping in his fingers jarred something loose inside. *How long would he last?* Part of him wondered clinically. Will breathed in as he leaned back. He held Gideon still while he swung his fist against the tender flesh of his cheek. First fist and he could feel teeth cutting into the inside of Gideon’s mouth with the blow, then again and his nose burst pleasantly, a short explosion, a splattering of blood against his chin and lips, and again and the flesh reddened, and the other hand landed a blow to his eye, swelling, and again and Gideon made a guttural, blubbering noise, and again and again and again.

Will was found outside when Crawford and his agents finally showed, sitting on the three small steps by the doorway. He let his hands hang down, his forearms resting on his knees. It made it easier on the traumatised skin, pulsing slowly with every heartbeat. The EMTs rushed to follow Hannibal inside and Will watched as Alana was loaded onto a stretcher and hurried into the ambulance. He expected Lecter to go with her but he stayed as the doors were slammed shut and the ambulance left.

Will could hear people moving about inside but he could tell Jack’s footsteps apart from the others. They walked slowly before stopping just beside him. He could feel Jack studying him,

could imagine what he saw. A man spattered in gore who didn't look nearly as guilty as he should.

"Looks like I'm calling another ambulance," Jack said significantly.

Will licked his lips and didn't respond. He tasted blood and his nerves jumped when he knew it was not his own.

"I want to go to the hospital," he said, "Alana..."

"I want you processed first," Jack said with authority, turning back to the house and calling inside, "Beverly, get out here and process Graham. I want swabs and trace. Just let her do her job, alright Will? Doctor Lecter, I need to speak to you."

Watching Jack lead Hannibal aside made Will feel tetchy, like telling Jack to keep his hands off of Will's things. Will could only imagine what Hannibal would think if he knew what Will was thinking. He couldn't stop himself from closing his eyes and letting out a disturbing chuckle. Look what you've done, Will's conscience held the tone of a mildly reproachful parent.

He felt Beverly hunch down in front of him. Opening his eyes, he found her doing what Jack had asked, one swab for his knuckles, another for his face, a sticky pad against his clothes picking up the fibre and trace evidence. Her face was professionally blank. Will didn't strike up a conversation. It was as she popped the swabs closed that she finally looked him in the eye.

"You're still in there, right?" she asked.

"I don't think you want to ask me that right now."

"He's still alive," she said, standing, "in case you wanted to know."

He understood her meaning. 'Wanted to know' that he wasn't a killer, nothing more; he knew she could already tell he didn't care if Gideon lived or died. Beverly looked reluctant to leave it at that. Will looked up at her, Jack and Hannibal still talking in the gloom out the corner of his eye.

"Are you alright?" she asked hesitantly.

"No."

"Your head's bleeding," she said, looking momentarily sad before she hid it beneath her work-face, "let me see."

He allowed her to shine the flashlight into his eyes. He blinked once she was done, rubbing at his eyelids. He could hear Jack and Hannibal approaching.

"I think he has a mild concussion," Beverly said to Jack, putting her flashlight back in its pouch.

“Just the evidence, Katz,” Jack said precisely, “that’s all.”

“He’s pretty beat up,” Beverly said seriously, seeming to unconsciously move between Will and Jack, “I’ll take these back to the lab,” she looked back to Will, “Shouldn’t you be getting to hospital?”

“I don’t know,” Will said, looking to Jack, “should I?”

A telling silence. Jack stared at him and Will didn’t have the compulsion to look small and vulnerable as he usually would. Instead he stared back, maintaining eye contact that normally would have been uncomfortable.

“Get yourself checked out,” Jack said; Will heard the double meaning in his words.

“I will drive you,” Hannibal said.

“He can go in the ambulance,” Jack tried to intervene.

“Do you think it wise to put Will in a confined space with Abel Gideon right now, Agent Crawford?” Hannibal asked, eyebrows raised slightly for effect.

“...Alright,” Jack said, not commenting on Lecter’s question, “but I’ll be sending someone to keep an eye on Will. Don’t try anything problematic.”

“I do not appreciate what you are insinuating,” Hannibal said, placing a steadying hand on Will’s shoulder as he stood shakily; he looked at Will, “can you walk?”

“Yes,” Will said, clutching at Hannibal’s arm regardless as they walked to the car sitting in the dark.

Will sat very still. Whether for the sake of the man cleaning his hands or because he simply didn’t feel like moving, he hadn’t decided yet. The soft cloth was placed into the basin and rubbed, splashing the water lightly over the faint sounds of the hospital from the other side of the closed door.

“Does it ever come off?”

“Mostly,” Hannibal answered.

Will wished he could be more definite. *Mostly*. That was what Will felt he should be worried about, that something still stuck. Only he wasn’t, and that was what concerned him. He should have been a shaking mess on the floor, curled in, clasping his hands to cover the scraped, burst skin. Instead he simply watched as Hannibal cleaned his wounds, eyes clear.

The water had turned a faint pink.

“Do they hurt?” Hannibal asked.

“Only as much as they should.”

“A penance?”

“A reminder.”

A pause. Hannibal halted his movements, sitting back in his chair to watch Will, his face unreadable. The room seemed small in its hospital green, cluttered with equipment and a low bed, charts on the walls and that universal hospital smell. Thankfully there were no white curtains.

Eventually Hannibal spoke.

“Do you wish it to come off?”

Tell the truth, it demanded.

“...No.”

“Because it is a reminder of your ability or your violence?”

“My ability is my violence. And anyway, that’s not the reason.”

“May I ask what is?”

“You may.”

“But I must not expect an answer.”

“No.”

“May I ask another?”

“Would you still ask if I told you not to?”

“Of course not,” Hannibal said, folding the cloth in his fingers into a perfect square; he lifted Will’s left hand and began cleaning once more.

A knock at the door. Hannibal answered it, revealing a nurse with medical supplies. It didn’t take much for Lecter to convince her that he was more than capable of dealing with Will’s injuries.

“Ask her,” Will spoke up just as the nurse turned to leave; Hannibal looked at him for a second too long, almost losing the opportunity.

“Excuse me,” Hannibal stepped half way out into the corridor, speaking to the nurse whom Will could no longer see, “can you give us an update on Miss Bloom’s condition?”

“I’m not sure, sorry,” the nurse said, “but I can find Doctor James, I think he’s the attending.”

“Thank you.”

Hannibal closed the door and Will spoke up.

"Is he still out there?" he asked.

"Yes. I did not take the agents name, but he is still outside. I believe he will be until Jack arrives."

Will bit at the inside of his cheek absently. The thought wasn't as sobering as it should have been. Jack. *What have you done*. Alana. Alana, Alana, Alana. That was sobering. She had been unconscious but he hadn't seen any blood, no injuries. His chest clenched at the thought of what Gideon had planned to do to her.

Open the throat, A to B, let's see what's inside. She had wanted to look into him, pull his mind apart, it was only fair he looked back. Showed the world what that pretty tongue could do on display. You are in no state to know who you are, Dr. Gideon. He'd show her who he was capable of being. One slice, two slice. The Ripper would appreciate the clean cuts, the arranged anatomy like a Da Vinci sketch.

Will closed his eyes. Gideon still sat there, smiling at him, face split and teeth missing. Will wished he could close his eyes against that too.

Hannibal brought the supplies to the table and took his seat. He opened a bottle which leaked a heady, chemical smell. Hannibal began cleaning his wounds with the contents; Will guessed antiseptic. He looked at Hannibal through half lidded eyes. He felt oddly detached from the touch against his palm, keeping his hand upright.

"What did Jack ask you?"

"He asked me what happened," Hannibal said simply; he complicated it by adding, "would you like me to tell you what I said? It would be best if our stories were a matching set, would it not?"

"You lied."

"I paraphrased."

"Why?"

"Because I want to take care of you," Hannibal said, "and you need taking care of."

A humming rumble as something heavy was wheeled along the corridor outside. Will wasn't sure what to do with the words he was hearing. *What do you want to know?*

"You stood and watched. You just stood and watched me."

"I was attending to Alana, Will."

"You didn't even try and stop me."

"Did you wish for me to stop you?"

"No."

"Well then," Hannibal said as if it were perfectly reasonable; for a moment Will wondered if he were the mad one to who made no sense.

During the pause there was no silence. Will almost wished there would be. He could hear voices, muffled, from beyond the walls. He could hear the soft sound of the cloth rubbing over his skin. He could hear the low hum of the light fittings. For once, he thought, for once can't I just have a little *quiet?* When it did not come Will decided talk was a better option than half-baked silence.

“You can ask,” he said eventually, "whatever it was. You can ask."

“I thought I could not expect an answer.”

“You can only try and see.”

The eyes that regarded him as bandages were fetched scrutinised in an unpleasant manner. Not because they were harsh, cold or even unfeeling. Because they were curious. Will did not need Hannibal to be curious about him, not now. Whether he picked up on Will’s reticence or his curiosity simply dulled, Lecter’s gaze became blank once more.

“Do you wish you had killed him?”

Alana, nearly dead, Alana, hurt, Alana, watching him hopefully, the Chesapeake Ripper, inside his head, the Chesapeake Ripper, making his rapid heart slow as he swung his fists.

“...Yes.”

The white material was wound around his hand slowly, delicately, but with practiced experience. Will watched as the scraped and broken skin was covered with each pass, disappearing beneath pristine white. He looked back to Hannibal. The man didn’t say a word.

Will wondered if he was still wearing the face which had brought Crawford to a halt earlier.

“Not what you were expecting?” Will asked.

“No,” Hannibal confessed.

“Will that become a problem?”

“No,” this time the word was accompanied by eyes lifting to his face; Hannibal was as sincere as Will had ever seen him, tying off the bandage and tucking in the tails.

“Then you do need it,” Will said, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“What do I need?” Hannibal asked.

“Our guilt.”

“You misjudge me.”

“Do I?”

“You assume it is your guilt in which I *revel*, as you so tactlessly put it,” Hannibal said, starting on the right hand, “and do not see it for what it is.”

“That being?”

“Your trust,” Hannibal said, “you tell me the things which you would hide from others. Perhaps forever. It is not your guilt, Will, it is yourself. I appreciate that you are yourself around me.”

“I wish you wouldn’t ask me to be,” Will said, lowering his brow and listening as heavy footsteps walked down the corridor outside, stopping by the door.

“And why is that?”

“It gets messy,” Will said as there was a knock.

“I am quite capable of cleaning up.”

“Mmm,” Will hummed as Hannibal answered the door to a young doctor with a solemn face; he looked down at his pristine, material bound hands, the violence hidden from view, “I noticed.”

He noticed.

Chapter End Notes

> Just a quick note to say a huge thank you to everyone who has left a comment or a kudos or even just read and enjoyed this story so far. You are all a huge set of absolute lovelies and I really appreciate all the support :)

Éclaircissement

Chapter Summary

> So this is a thing that happened. It's a long one. It got a bit out of hand and Hannibal started suggesting terrible things. I sometimes forget he's not the nicest of people. I'm beginning to worry no amount of hugs will make up for this.
>
> Title translation - 'Éclaircissement' - 'an enlightening explanation of something hitherto inexplicable'

Chapter Notes

> Just realised I made a huge mistake with Gideon's body count. I had Will say he killed one, when really he killed five (the three in the van during his transfer, the psychiatrist and then Agent Hemmingway). Not sure how I managed to mess that up so badly, but it has been amended!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No one’s asked,” the nurse said as she read down his patient chart, “are you on any other medication?”

Will hesitated, then, “Clozapine,” he murmured, rubbing his eyes.

“I see,” the nurse noted; Will noticed her posture stiffening, unsuccessfully hidden beneath her shifting from one foot to the other, “any more nice surprises you have for me Mr. Graham?”

“Yeah, if you want a blood sample you’re going to have to get creative,” he said wryly, “I don’t like needles.”

He flicked his eyes up and caught her looking down at the IV threaded into the vein at the crook of his left elbow, her mouth opening. He cut her off.

“Let’s just say you’re lucky you did that while I was unconscious.”

That was a conversation stopper. She cleared her throat and did her best to look unconcerned, making a note on his chart. Will ignored it. He felt he was becoming a master of ignoring unpleasantness recently.

She left, her shoes squeaking on the hard floor. He waited four minutes, shifting around on the bed, before getting up. The IV stand made a good support, considering his legs still felt weak. It moved with an uncertain location in mind as it rolled beside him, its wheels twitching it right and left. He held it tightly and forced himself to move.

No more agent outside his room, no more waiting for Jack to turn up. Will had been spared that ugliness by way of his collapsing onto the floor the previous night, as he had been escorted to the bathroom, with a fever of one hundred and four. If he tried very hard he could remember people above him, talking, muffled. It had been as if he were stuck beneath a thick duvet, struggling to get out. He wasn't sure if his memories could be trusted. He had awoken later, in the pitch black, terrified. He couldn't remember what his dreams had been of, but they had scared him. He thought he might have kept the staff up, screaming as he woke.

When he'd asked at the desk he'd been informed that agent Crawford had left a message for him. He had read it with shaking hands.

Manhunt still on. Going in deep before we lose the Ripper's trail. Can't spare the agent at your door. Don't make me regret trusting you Will. Call me when you're out.

Will hadn't given the paper back, instead shuffling to his room with it in his hands. He'd sat on the bed and blocked out the morning sun with thick curtains until lunchtime when the nurse had made her rounds. One question circled his mind, one which the doctors hadn't answered yet.

What is wrong with me? *What is wrong with me?*

Now, under the florescent glow of the corridor, Will walked, staring at the numbers above the doors he passed. It wasn't a long walk to the ICU. All he could hear as he walked was the soft shuffle of his socks on the floor, the steady, constant beeping of machinery and the *huff-hiss* of respirators pumping air into catatonic lungs. The background of running wheels and noisy chatter was dulled here. It felt absurdly quiet for a hospital.

Another twenty paces down the quiet corridor and he found the room he was looking for. He peered in through the small window on the door. For a moment, staring in, he considered turning around and walking back the way he had come.

Alana lay on the bed. She looked still. So still. A respirator at her mouth, pushing her chest up and down rhythmically. Her eyes closed. Her face colourless. Her body hung about with wires. Will closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the glass. It was cool but not as cold as he'd expected. His fever had broken in the night; one hundred and eight degrees if his chart was to be believed. According to the doctor who had spoken to him that morning, youthful face marred with a frown, he was lucky to be alive.

Will felt like telling him he felt as lucky to be alive as a horse saved from the race track just to be shipped off to the glue factory.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there. When he looked up Alana hadn't moved. Not that he expected she would have. Only hoped. Doctor James' words from the night before came back to him as he stared.

“We are still not sure just how much chloroform Miss Bloom was given and, to be truthful with you, it is uncertain which problems will manifest from its ingestion. At the moment she is in a stable coma but we have no way of knowing for how long. It could be two days, it could be two months. Effects we might see in the next forty eight hours are hepatoxicity...” the doctor said as he stood by the door.

“Her liver,” Hannibal had clarified for Will.

“Right, liver damage,” the doctor said, eyes flicking to Hannibal and then back to Will, “but that is the best case scenario. Caught this early in the stages of poisoning, it is likely the liver could make a full recovery in about seven to nine months. Worst case? She also incurs renal damage. Depending on the level of toxicity and how long it was in the body, it could lead to renal failure and dialysis. After gastric aspiration and keeping her breathing, there’s really little else we can do but wait.”

*“*Nothing *else?” Will had asked.*

“Surely you have her scheduled for an ECG,” Hannibal said, making the young doctor flinch as if he were being examined by the dean of medicine.

“We do, yes, but I’m afraid that will only keep us abreast of her symptoms. I’m sorry Mr. Graham, Dr. Lecter. All you can do now is have faith.”

Faith, he had wanted to say, was something he had always possessed in small supply. Will took another look inside. Go in and see her, he told himself. It’s the least you can do. He looked around him with paranoid jerks of his head. The coast looked clear. He opened the door quietly and pushed the large IV through first. It wasn’t until he was inside, door closed, that he saw the man standing against the wall, hands wrapped around his middle protectively.

Will stalled, his mind too fogged to deal with sudden changes. His feet didn’t know what to do with themselves. They moved, for a moment, like the IV stand; all lefts and rights. Eventually he stopped fidgeting, deciding to head for the wide seat opposite the hospital bed in which Alana lay. He needed to sit down. Collapsing on the floor wouldn’t have been easy to shrug off. He stared at the man, at his throat where his adam’s apple bobbed.

“I heard you got off easy,” Will said, the chill in his voice unmistakable.

Chilton didn’t reply. He stood, hunched and sickly pale, wearing the suit Will assumed he must have been wearing the night before. The grey suit jacket was buttoned closed over a shirt which sat open over his chest, the material bunched closed fruitlessly. Will could see there were no buttons on the white material. His hands were an odd colour, slightly yellow around the nails. Chilton caught him staring and looked at him resentfully.

“He cut them off,” he said, trying vainly to fix the material as Will blinked slowly, “with the scalpel he planned to use on me.”

“What stopped him, I wonder?”

“The cavalry,” Chilton couldn’t help but sound relieved even as he was being facetious, “I don’t think I’ve ever been more pleased to see Jack Crawford. Nor probably ever will be again.”

No reply. Will didn’t have one. He stared at the bed. *Alana still. Alana not moving. Alana breathing steadily with the help of multitudinous machines without which she would die*. Will could feel Chilton’s restlessness. It put him on edge. Chilton stared off into the middle distance, almost as if he weren’t in the room at all. Will wished he would leave. He would have told him to if he didn’t feel so helpless.

“I heard Alana had been hurt so I came to see her...” Chilton took a deep breath, “I almost can’t believe it.”

“Believe what?” Will bit out.

“That this happened,” Chilton sounded as genuine as Will had ever heard him, “this all seems like...I’m not sure. Some sort of waking nightmare.”

“Yeah.”

Silence. Chilton fussed with his jacket before pushing up from the wall, walking to Alana’s bed to look down at her. His hand shook when he reached out to steady himself on the bed rail. Will itched to get him out of the picture.

“What happened to you?” he asked, finally looking at Will.

“Fever,” Will shrugged.

“You look like you’ve been on the business end of a bar brawl,” Chilton said, his lips twitching upwards; Will didn’t react and the man’s half-desperate-smile disappeared, “One of the nurses told me you collapsed.”

“Yeah.”

“The doctors say she has a good chance of waking up,” Chilton looked back to Alana, his face terse, as if keeping up a conversation with Will was incredibly taxing.

“She’s in a coma.”

“Never an optimist, were you.”

“You got off *easy*.”

“He was going to cut me open, you know,” Chilton spat as if Will should show more respect, “take everything out like a damn, damn...*gift basket*.”

“Didn’t though, did he.”

“No,” Chilton said, staid, “no he did not. And if what I hear is correct he might never get the chance to again.”

Will bit at the inside of his cheek, chewing the flesh until it began to hurt. *Gideon bloodied, Gideon smiling, Gideon choking on his own teeth*. He closed his eyes and rubbed at the bridge of his nose with forefinger and thumb. The whispering lips at his ear grinned. Will swatted them away with his hand, then realised what he was doing and stopped.

“If it’s any consolation,” Chilton said, his voice wavering slightly, “I can’t say I feel sorry for him.”

“Excuse me if I’m not enthusiastic.”

“This is just...” Chilton sounded suddenly furious; Will looked to him, his small eyes hard, his mouth a thin line, “you’re acting like this was my fault!”

“Your words,” Will said, eyes narrowed, “not mine. Says a lot.”

“How do you *expect* me to be...”

“You convinced him,” Will said far louder than he’d meant to, silencing Chilton with sheer volume; once he started he couldn’t stop, his voice thick with venom and disgust, his eyes burning, “with your small minded egotism and your small dreams. You wanted Gideon to be the Ripper because you’re a third rate psychologist in a second rate institution, *begging* for a way to show all your eminent colleagues that you did something with your waste of a fucking life. A waste, that’s what you are. A *fucking waste*. Look at her. I said look at her!”

He knew he was shouting because someone was knocking at the door. Chilton looked pale once more, paler than Will had ever seen the man. Dark circles stood out above his sweaty cheeks. He clutched at his abdomen with claw-like fingers, as if imagining what it would have been like if Gideon had been given more time. The door opened to reveal the nurse who had tended him earlier and a large orderly with a stern face.

“Look at what you’ve fucking done you god damned hypocrite! Gideon left you to come for her!”

Will was half way through being manhandled out of Alana’s hospital room when Hannibal appeared at the end of the corridor. Will saw him out of the corner of his eye while he snapped at the nurse and glared at the orderly every time the man put his large hands on Will’s arm. Another touch and another threat from the nurse and then Lecter’s hand was on his shoulder. He could tell the touch without looking, hear his soft yet authoritative voice.

“Please,” he said, “allow me to take Will back to his room.”

“Just make sure he stays there,” the nurse said, annoyed, her forehead creased as she crossed her arms, “the last thing the patients here need is some psycho shouting his head off.”

Some psycho. Will couldn’t stop his eyes snapping to her, his breath coming in a stutter. Everyone sees you, the mouth at his ear whispered slyly.

“You appear to have a problem with candour,” Hannibal said, voice stern to Will’s ear, though he imagined it sounded merely dry to anyone else, “do you affront all of your

patients?”

“Only when they’re on anti-psychotics,” she muttered as she turned and walked away, the orderly giving Will a concerned look as they left.

Eyes closed and the world swayed. Will focused on Hannibal’s hand, holding him still.

“Come, Will,” Hannibal said, “let’s find you somewhere quiet to sit down.”

On the way back to his room Hannibal stopped at the nurse’s station to inquire after the name of the woman who had spoken out of turn. No complaint, just the name. Will watched him quietly as he did so. Then Hannibal led him back to his room, a hand on his elbow. It was blessedly quiet when the door was shut.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” was the first thing Will said to him.

“I understand,” Hannibal said, “was the doctor able to tell you what was wrong?”

“An infection, he wasn’t sure what from,” Will said, “I had a high inflammation count. He gave me antibiotics to take.”

“A sure course, but you also need to rest and recuperate.”

“I can do that anywhere,” Will reasoned; his voice wavered as he added, “just...please.”

“Alright,” Hannibal nodded, walking to the foot of the bed and picking up Will’s medical file; he flicked the paper up and over the clipboard, eyes running quickly down the page, “your temperature is still high but nothing worrying. Hydration is good. Your fever is down. I don’t see why you cannot sign yourself out.”

“Good,” Will nodded tightly, and again; he looked up at Hannibal, the man still studying his chart. Will’s mind tried its best to go to dark places. He swallowed, mouth opening before he said quietly, “take me home.”

There was something odd, he knew, in where Hannibal took him at his request. Will was not driven back to Wolf Trap, to his pack and his ship on the sea. Instead Hannibal took him to his bourgeois city gallery, sitting stately and well lit in the growing dark. Will did not bring it up, nor did he complain. He had left the back door open for the dogs, they wouldn’t miss him till morning.

But he would miss them. Even in this elegant house, dotted with family, he thought. Will walked as steadily as he could into the hallway. He had planned to go straight to the sitting room and curl up on the couch. It was the mirror by the coat rack that stopped him. He heard Hannibal hanging up his coat and jacket, taking off his shoes. Will looked at himself in the mirror and wasn’t prepared for what stared back.

The bruises across his throat had darkened overnight, a sunset of red and purple stripes across his jugular. A thumb mark stood out against his windpipe, darker, prominent. The left eye was ringed with deep purple, black in places, and swollen; his left cheek similarly so. Lower lip was burst, a red scab over the split. The cut on his forehead had been stuck back together with a slim plaster but the bruise overlapped, half covered by stray curls.

The inside showing on the outside at last, hmm? the lips asked.

He reached up and touched the sensitive flesh of his face, wincing. There were feet on the stairs and Will tightened. *Escape*. His eyes flitted around the hallway but he waited too long. Abigail stood on the middle landing of the staircase when he turned around, her hands around the banister. She looked at him, mouth slightly open, her hair tucked tightly behind her ears.

Her hands seemed overly pale against the dark wood.

“Oh my god,” she said softly, sounding shocked, “are you ok?”

Are you ok? Alana’s face rose up, her brow creased. Will blinked rapidly, looking away from Abigail’s dark eyes.

“Yeah,” he lied, “yeah I’m ok sweetheart. Just...”

Just what? he asked himself. Just crazy? Just tipped over the edge? Just a little homicidal, don’t worry about it? Will would have laughed if things weren’t so dire. Instead he left it unfinished and walked to the sitting room without another word.

“Abigail, would you please boil the kettle for me?” he heard Hannibal ask.

No footsteps followed him.

The sitting room was brightly lit and the curtains drawn, creating a homely warmth with the darkness trapped outside. There was already a fire in the grate. Did he do all this before coming for me? Will wondered as he walked in, savouring the heat, Or has Abigail being making herself at home? *Why are you even asking?* a small part of him wondered. Because, he thought, it smacks of strategy. The last thing I want to be right now is *manoeuvred*.

Will decided to distract himself. He pulled his phone from his jacket pocket and dialled; Jack would be expecting him.

“This is Crawford.”

“It’s me.”

“Right,” Will heard a door shut and wondered if Jack was in his office, “I don’t have time to waste, so here’s the long and short of it. Samples are still being processed on our end, held up by Gideon’s leftovers. Once it all goes through you’re suspended until review. Right now, however, we have a window.”

“Alright,” Will didn’t have the energy to feel offended or worried.

“Don’t take this as absolution, Will,” Crawford said, tone severe, “but I’m not letting you walk away from this one.”

“Who’s walking away?” Will asked, irritated; a pause, then, “I take it you don’t want me near the hornet’s nest.”

“You stay where you are until I come get you,” Jack said authoritatively, “you come in here and things’ll get complicated. I don’t need any more complication.”

“Han...Dr. Lecter brought me home...to his house I mean,” why don’t I just stick my whole foot in my damn mouth? Will thought, “Dr. Lecter brought me to his house just for now. Keeping an eye on me.”

“How bad is it?”

“I wouldn’t put me in front of any cameras.”

“Didn’t plan on holding a press conference.”

“This is going to get messy, Jack.”

“Little late for that.”

“I wasn’t talking about me,” Will said, sitting down carefully on the sofa by the window, “The Ripper is going to make the headlines again in the next two days, guaranteed, it’ll be in the next two and the body count will be higher than his usual.”

“Why two days?” Jack asked, slipping into the change in conversation with professional ease.

“Because it took Gideon three to kill five,” Will said simply, itching at the tape mark where the IV had been, “and Freddie gave Gideon credit for everything, even Carson Nahn. The Ripper will want to outdo him. His sounders have only ever reached three bodies before. This time he’ll do four.”

“Yeah,” Jack sounded simultaneously deflated and keyed up; low at the thought of a high body count, high on the chase and the thought of the Ripper in his sights, “I can see that. I can see that all too well.”

“He won’t wait. This isn’t the time to roll over. He’ll want to reassert his supremacy, remind us he’s better. Show us he’s not cowed.”

“I know. That’s what I’m afraid of. He isn’t going to make this a private show.”

“I’ll be here when the calls start coming in.”

Will closed his eyes and sat back against the soft material of the sofa and put his phone back in his pocket. He wrapped his arms around his chest and listened to the sound of water boiling faintly from beyond the hall. This time he didn’t hear Hannibal coming; without his shoes on he was sleekly silent. Instead Will looked up to find the man turning on a lamp by the cabinet beneath the ornate mirror.

“Sorry you didn’t get to visit Alana,” he said, having to stop himself licking the scab on his lip.

“No need to feel responsible,” Hannibal said, “I have already spoken to her doctor. He informed me there was no change. I’ll admit I was concerned when you were not in your room.”

“I don’t like being closed in.”

“Is that how you feel now?” Hannibal asked.

“I feel...” Will sighed, touching his neck absently with his fingertips, “like I’m trying to go up the downslide. There’s no purchase.”

“Your word choice has been singularly bleak of late,” Hannibal commented, bending at the waist to place a log on the dying fire.

“Ha,” Will laughed out loud before smothering it with his right hand; his lip stung, “yes. It has, hasn’t it. You going to build me a semantic profile? Some encoding? Should I be verbalising more optimistic concepts?”

“I do believe I am being mocked,” Hannibal didn’t sound amused as he stood, dusting off his hands.

“Mocking myself,” Will shrugged, smiling derisively, “thought you would have been able to tell the difference by now.”

Will looked down at his hands, the bandages sticking out from under his jacket sleeves. Hannibal sat down next to him, hands clasped, elbows resting on his knees. The clock on the mantelpiece seemed to tick louder than usual. The fire crackled and the precarious log shifted down with a thump as the foundations gave way.

“It is not a simple feeling,” Hannibal said eventually, staring at the fire, “guilt.”

“I should know,” Will said, “it takes up so much of my time.”

“What do you feel guilty for, Will?”

“Shouldn’t you be telling me?”

“You are most antagonistic tonight.”

“Alana,” he said, sighing tightly; he wished Hannibal could be more accommodating, just this once, “for Alana. She...she deserves so much more than she gets. Than she wants. I can’t stand the thought of...yeah,” Will blinked his eyes and swallowed, “I don’t want to think about it.”

“Your intuition saved Alana Bloom’s life,” Hannibal said, looking at Will over his left shoulder.

“My intuition is grotesque. A Frankenstein of psychos,” Will said darkly, “It’s all bits.”

“You think of yourself as a mirror,” Hannibal said, sitting back against the couch, hands on his thighs, “but your mirror can reflect the best of yourself, Will, not just the worst of others.”

“No," he shook his head, "that’s just wishful thinking. When I look all I can see is Budge’s brutality, Budish’s blind hope, Stammets’ practicality, Garret Jacob Hobbs’ calm adoration for the kill. So many others all sewn together. I can’t help it. Not sure which bits are mine anymore. “

“You see what they see, and thus you know what they seek.”

“I have a little devil on my shoulder,” Will thought of the whispering lips and felt grim.

“Is there no angel, for balance?”

“Nope. Just me. Not much balance there.”

“I hate to have to ask you this, Will, but are you hearing voices?”

“You know, I used to hear my own thoughts inside my skull,” he said, looking up at the ceiling, avoiding the question even as he answered it, “with the same tone, timber, accent; as if the words were coming out of my mouth.”

“And now?”

“Now my inner-voice sounds like someone else.”

“That is rather vague.”

“Well I’ve never heard him speak, so I suppose my imagination is filling in a lot of blanks.”

“Who is it you imagine?”

“The Chesapeake Ripper,” Will closed his eyes and the lips at his ear blew a kiss; Will shivered, “I can’t get him out of my head. You know, I always imagined him with a gentleman’s drawl. That’s odd isn’t it? That I’ve wondered what he sounds like?”

“Not at all,” Hannibal replied, “if you are to conjure a man for the purposes of hearing him, he must have a voice with which to speak.”

“I thought you hated to ask if I was hearing voices,” Will cracked open his right eye and looked at Hannibal through the slit.

The man did not reply, merely picked up Will’s right hand by the wrist and delicately laid out the fingers against his own palm. Will felt his face twitch in sympathy with the swollen joints as Lecter flexed each one in turn with practical movements.

“You told me last night,” Hannibal said as he placed Will’s hand back down onto the couch, holding out his hand for the other; Will accommodated by turning to lean on his right side

and face him, offering his left hand for inspection, “that you wished you had killed Abel Gideon.”

“I remember,” Will said.

“Was that a truth?” Hannibal asked as he bent the middle finger until the bandages began to tense, “Or the fever talking?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve admitted it.”

Hannibal looked off to a point in the middle distance, his head level, as he always did when contemplating; his hands continued to move without his eyes watching where his fingers went. After another few seconds his brows rose minutely and he looked back to Will’s hand.

“You are speaking of Stammets.”

“Mmm,” Will agreed, “only then I suppose I couldn’t be sure how I felt when I pulled the trigger. Maybe I missed my target, or maybe I was aiming for his shoulder. Even I don’t know anymore. With Gideon I can’t hold onto that...ambiguity.”

Delicate touches ran up and down the backs of his fingers, where the skin was sensitive. Lecter was done with his assessment and appeared to be lost in thought. Will smiled when his arm jerked, letting out a small, confused laugh. *How can you laugh?* He didn’t have an answer. He was in his bubble, the bubble Hannibal had held him inside ever since he had allowed the man to swallow him whole.

“I didn’t feel a sprig of zest when I shot Eldon Stammets,” he admitted, “not like Hobbs.”

“You didn’t kill Eldon Stammets,” Hannibal pointed out.

“I didn’t kill Abel Gideon,” Will shrugged lightly.

“Yet you felt a sprig of zest with him?” Hannibal treaded carefully.

“More than that,” Will said, shifting closer; he lay his head on Hannibal’s shoulder and the man slid an arm around his back in return, holding him close, “I’d say it was the whole, rotten fruit.”

A hand appeared in his hair, brushing the errant curls back from his forehead. Will opened his eyes, only realising how drained he felt now that he was comfortable. He looked up into maroon eyes and a face he’d once thought of as irritatingly unreadable, now obvious to him in its adoration. Words rose in his mind and left his lips without his consent.

“Would you bury my bodies in the ice, Hannibal?”

“Will I need to?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Should I take *that* as a yes?”

“Don’t worry,” Will said sleepily, unable to stop the yawn from forming; he covered his mouth and ignored the ache in his cheek as his jaw was stretched, “the only person who needs to be wary of me is Chilton. Slimy little fuck. He’s the one who should be on that hospital bed, hooked up with wires like a...a...”

“Marionette?” Hannibal suggested, his lips quirking.

“Yes, thank you, perfect,” Will said, getting comfortable against Hannibal’s side, sliding his bandaged left hand over the man’s chest, “It would be easy, wouldn’t it? I’m pretty sure between the two of us they’d never find the body.”

“We are certainly resourceful,” Hannibal consented.

A welcome pause, in which Will collected himself. He turned his nose against the skin of Hannibal’s neck. The smell he sought was overpowered by another.

“Have you been swimming?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You reek of chlorine.”

“Yes,” Hannibal said without guilt, “I swim when I am anxious. There is no time to think between strokes.”

“Think I can empathise with that,” Will said, even as he wished he could smell the usual cologne and undercurrent of warm, fresh skin.

He wasn’t sure if he had fallen asleep at first. Then, when he looked back to the clock, he noticed twenty minutes had gone to nothing. He blinked sleepily, realising how warm he was beneath his jacket.

“What were you boiling water for?” he asked.

“I am making cumin rice,” Lecter said as if no time had passed at all, “as a side for the Goan beef curry that has been marinating overnight in the fridge.”

“Sounds nice,” Will sat up, wriggling out of his jacket, bundling it into his hands; he felt antsy and tired all at once, “need any help?”

“You do not need to if...”

“Honestly, I think the diversion would do me good.”

“Very well,” Hannibal acquiesced, “wash your hands and allow me to change your bandages.”

Quarter of an hour later Will found himself standing in the kitchen chopping mint and cucumber. Hannibal moved about the kitchen, his white apron tied tightly around his waist beneath his dark blue shirt, eyes focused on his task as he placed the curry, which effused a

smell of star anise and curry leaves, into the oven in a lidded casserole dish and set about measuring rice. Will watched him through his eyelashes as he chopped.

He sees you, the lips drawled; for a disconcerting moment Will thought he saw something out of the corner of his eye. *Dark antlers and curved lips, smiling*.

Will nearly sliced through his index finger. He put the knife down quickly and wiped his hands on the tea towel sitting on the counter. His hands shook slightly. He stuffed them in his pockets and walked around the counter island towards the fridge, keeping quiet as he pulled it open and searched for the yoghurt.

"What else do you want in this?" he asked, looking at the tub as he walked back to his chopping board.

"Smoked paprika," Hannibal said as he rolled out a tall, slim drawer filled with hand labelled glass jars; he selected one for Will, a deep red powder inside, and another for himself filled with small, black seeds, "careful, it is quite fiery. Half a teaspoon to four hundred grams should suffice."

"You've got this down to a science, haven't you," Will said as he pulled a set of steel measuring spoons out of the utensil drawer.

"I find that a strict science allows for anything to become solvable, and so it is for cooking," Hannibal said as he poured a swathe of seeds into a large, granite mortar, seemingly measuring by sight as he added a few sprinkles more before he was satisfied, "the science of cooking allows for any recipe to become possible. It demystifies the complex."

"Demystifying the complex, now that's something I can get behind," Will said, "going to bottle it? You'd make a fortune."

"It would be no fun if things were that simple," Hannibal said as the rice began to simmer down from a rolling boil.

They ate in a silence broken only when Abigail asked tentatively how Alana was. Will had felt the food stick in his throat and his muscles tense. He'd waited for Hannibal to answer for him. There was something about the clinical explanation which Lecter was qualified to give that let him divorce himself from it altogether.

He watched as Abigail's face fell down and down, her jaw muscles loosening, her brow smoothing, her eyes slipping to her plate where she played with her food.

"Oh."

It had been the only indication she had heard any of what Hannibal had said. Lecter did not push her for more and Will certainly wasn't able to. Or willing to.

He and Hannibal retired to the library while the night lengthened. Will ran his hands along the books in their rows as his mind skipped about over the Copycat's kills as a distraction. *Bressinden, Bressinden, Bressinden,* it said. Something about him was different. Something

unique. Only Will hadn't had the chance to look, to *see*. He wondered if the thing which he'd ignored before, the context of the note, could be beneficial to understanding the motive.

Yet, when he looked, there was no trace of the copy he needed.

"You have *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*," Will said as Hannibal sat at his desk by the window, putting finishing touches to a pencil sketch of what appeared to be two people, one kneeling, one holding their outstretched hands, "but not *The Iliad?*"

"I find it a dry and cheerless book with miserable protagonists," Hannibal said, "I have never owned a copy. *The Aeneid,* comparatively, is most engaging. What could be more charming than the tale of a brave man accepting his destiny by embracing the sheer brutality needed to grasp it? All else is thrown to the gods. Family, compatriots, love."

"I always found the ending kind of horrifying."

"How so?"

"Aeneas starts off bright and optimistic. By the end he's a broken man standing over a corpse."

"An interesting interpretation," Hannibal said.

They left it at that, Hannibal scratching at the paper, Will standing by the towering bookshelves above as if worlds away.

It was dark and his eyes fluttered open, a gasp in his throat. *It's in here,* he thought desperately. Will turned sluggishly in the constricting sheets and panicked when his arm fell on nothing. *The stag was in the room*.

"...'annibal?" he slurred, his heart thudding in his chest like a piston.

Pushing up on his arms felt like trying to lift lead with putty. The room swam and there was a noise in the corner like metal tapping on metal. *Tap tap, tap tap tap*. It was hot and his breath came short.

"Ha...*Hannibal*," he felt sick.

A sudden noise in the walls, loud, high pitched and *shrieking*. Will let out a soft, keening cry as he flashed his eyes across the pitch. *Glassy eyes, do you see the glassy eyes?* It could come from anywhere, be sharp, be wary. He felt threatened by the darkness as soon as his eyes left it, his head spinning as he looked back and forth.

A noise at the door. He jerked straight.

Don't let it in!

He tried to pull at the covers but his hands wouldn't listen. The door opened and Will felt his limbs shutting down, unable to move. As the creature entered, all black skin shining, face impassive beneath its rack of fine, ebony antlers, and glassy, glassy eyes, Will wanted to open his mouth and scream. All he could do, in the end, was lie, paralysed, as it approached him on cloven feet.

Oh god oh god oh god oh *god*.

It reached down to wrap its long, fine fingers around his jugular.

He couldn't breathe.

"Will?"

He wanted to say he awoke but the feeling was more like one reality phasing into another. He snapped his teeth closed and cursed, hauling in a breath so quickly taken that it hurt his throat. He choked and fell to coughing roughly. Hands were around his shoulders, holding him still in the darkness. He fought against the grip, eyes squeezed shut as he coughed and tried to draw in air.

"Shh, it is alright," familiar voice, *Hannibal's voice*, "calm down. You are alright."

"The...light," he choked, coughing again as a hand soothed at his back, "put on..."

"Please, just calm down," Hannibal said, not letting go, "you were having a nightmare."

"I can't see," he gasped, "please, I can't."

"There is nothing to see, Will," Hannibal said from the darkness, "I am here. Do not worry."

He didn't remember falling back to sleep, or waking up, or *fallasleepwakingup*, nor did he remember his dreams after the tall stag had visited.

Will wished, as he stood outside a bright yellow school bus surrounded by a long snake of yellow police tape in the morning sun on a cordoned off street, that he wasn't so damn right all the time.

"How did the driver not see it?" Price was asking, his face incredulous.

"His statement says he was half asleep when he backed the bus out of the lot," Crawford said, looking up at the shining windows, "didn't notice anything was wrong until he heard something fall over with a..." Jack looked down at the transcript amid the papers in his hands, "splat."

"Great," Beverly said wryly, "that's set me up for the day. When do these buses get locked up?"

“Normally at half five,” Jack said, “so that gives us quite a window.”

“If he had the key,” Zeller said; all three looked to him, “what?”

“I’m pretty sure he knows how to pick a lock,” Will said, still staring at the bus; Zeller shrugged and glared at Jimmy when he laughed. Will was just glad that, so far, neither Price nor Zeller had commented on his multicoloured face and neck. He looked at Jack, “how much longer will they be?”

“They’ll take as long as they need,” Jack said seriously, “can’t be too careful where vehicles are involved.”

“The Ripper isn’t going to bomb us,” Will muttered.

“Think he’s getting attached?” Beverly tried to joke.

“No,” Will said, hunching his shoulders, “just that it would ruin his work.”

That shut everyone up. Reminder, Will thought as the heavily armoured bomb squad vacated the bus and slid out from the undercarriage giving them the all clear, don’t say anything else that could make you sound like a lunatic. Will wondered, as he walked at the back of the line, if he would even know the difference any more.

“Jesus,” Zeller said as they stepped into the long, low bus, hand coming to his face as it wrinkled in involuntary disgust, “never mind not see it, how did he not *smell* it?”

“Yeah, that’s a legitimate question,” Beverly said, her face pinched as she put her collection kit down on the floor near the driver’s seat, “well, it’s dark in the lot. Maybe the sun accelerated the decomp?”

Will realised he was the only one staring. He walked forwards, up the central gangway, and looked down at one half of what was once a man, sliced cleanly in two from pate to groin. One half lay artlessly on the floor, leg and arm splayed and insides leaking. The other was set perfectly upon one of the seats above, hand on his knee, eye facing forwards. Will itched to pick up the displaced half and put it back in its intended position, while part of him was disgusted at the thought of touching the rancid mess.

The clean cut was unbelievably precise. The man looked like an anatomy sculpture in a medical museum. Will squatted down to peer at the sliver of skull around the dulled pink of the brain, the skein of intestines held loosely in place.

“Need some time Will?” Jack asked leadingly.

“No,” Will shook his head, “I mean yes, I will. Just...do you think he could have been frozen?”

“Frozen?” Zeller asked, walking up to Will and putting his kit down as he pulled out his camera and his evidence markers, “Could be. That’s one clean cut. And it would have made him easier to transport. Sloppy otherwise.”

“And it would have stopped anyone noticing the smell until he thawed out,” Beverly said, snapping a long shot from the driver’s seat with her camera.

“We’ll know for sure once I take a sample back at the lab,” Zeller said, bending down to place a card by what looked like a kidney, sitting slippery on the floor.

“He would have had to freeze him like that,” Jack noted, elaborating when will looked round, “in that exact position.”

“The man likes to plan,” Will said, “must’ve had his locations all calculated. Although I suppose this guy would fit in most vehicles. Do we know who he is?”

“You know what we know,” Jack shook his head, “any ID?”

“Where am I supposed to look?” Zeller asked sarcastically, “His spleen?”

“Actually I think you should be looking for what’s missing,” Will said, “see any holes?”

Will complimented Zeller silently on his control as the man hunkered down beside the upright half and stared intensely into its innards. He looked up, down, side to side; Will could see he was holding his breath. Then he turned to the other half and kneeled down, leaning forwards on his hands, giving it the once over. Finally he stood up, huffing in air and unable to stop a small gag in his throat, covering his mouth with the back of a gloved hand.

“There’s only one kidney,” he said, swallowing, “this one on the floor. And his lungs are gone.”

“That’s his calling card alright,” Jack said.

“Not all though,” Zeller continued, standing back, “thought his tongue was gone too, but it’s just been moved. Look,” he pointed to the upright half and Will moved in to get a better look, “cut out at the stem and shoved in behind his teeth. Not sure if the other half was the same, it fell out. What do you think?”

The words hung around in his throat while Will considered whether they were appropriate or just inflammatory. He cleared his throat and pushed his glasses up his nose.

“Sounds like a joke to me,” Beverly spoke up as she gathered a blood sample from the runnel forming on the floor.

“He thinks it’s funny,” Will said, nodding, glad that he hadn’t been the only one to point it out.

“Tongue in cheek?” Price asked, shaking his head from his spot by the open door as he dusted the handle; Will nodded to him, “*Really*?”

“And what exactly is it he finds so funny?” Jack asked, face set.

“Us,” Will said, sighing as Jack bristled, “for even trying.”

No sooner had they processed the crime scene and transported the corpse back to the forensics lab, did another call come in.

“Two in one day?” Price said as they all sat bundled into the same SUV, the sun roof open to clear the air; Will was glad for it. He was hot beneath his hair, neck damp with sweat. Price continued, “He’s accelerating.”

“Then he’ll slip up,” Zeller joined in, “let him.”

Will sat, shaking his head in the front passenger seat, muttering under his breath. Jack, driving, looked at him briefly.

“What is it?”

Pulling in a long breath, Will let it out slowly.

“Not accelerating, he’s...” he searched for the words, “showing off.”

Showing off. The words sparked a trail of association in his mind which he was in no state to curb.

‘You know I’m just coming to realise that you’re a terrible show off,’ he said as he sipped dark, red wine : Showing off, Will thought, ‘*you’re doing it again*’ : ‘*Then please do not feel that what I do is for the purposes of* showing off*, as you so crudely put it*’ : ‘*Watch out Will, your obligation is showing*’ : ‘*I can show you how’* Hannibal said, hand at Will’s cheek, *‘No need to tear yourself apart*’

When he zoned back in Will found his own hand at his cheek, mimicking the memory. He pulled it away and stuffed it into his pocket as if to lock it there, rubbing at his right eye with his other hand. He leaned heavily on the door with his elbow. Shut *up*, he told himself sternly. You need to focus here. *God damn focus*.

The next body at least wasn’t as gory as the last. More tragically beautiful, Will thought as he stared down into the clear waters of the lake and the ethereal sight of the naked woman, seen through a slightly green filter of the shoreline waters. Her hair flowed free in the undercurrents, blonde and pale. Her face, her hands, feet, skin, all perfectly preserved.

“So how do we get her out?” Zeller asked.

“And what’s holding her down?” Beverly asked, frowning.

Once the divers arrived both questions became intertwined. Will, Beverly, Price and Zeller sat on a large, flat rock by the water, the scene processed and awaiting a body. Jack stood, still as a statue, watching the divers as they worked ten feet below the surface.

“Sir?” one of the divers broke the surface, pulling off her mask.

They watched as the woman spoke to Jack, shaking her head. Beverly looked to Will, jerking her head to the side. He nodded in reply. They stood and approached Jack and the female diver, Price and Zeller following quickly.

"...to the rocks, I don't think we'll be able to move her without some sort of crane or chain hoist," she was saying.

"Alright," Jack said, sounding tightly wound, "are you finished with pictures?"

"Neil's just taking them now," she said, pulling off her headgear, her dark hair making her pale skin seem paler, "we'll be out of your way in two minutes."

"Thanks Katie," Jack said, even though he sounded anything but.

They waited for Jack to talk first. When he didn't, Will decided to break the ice.

"She's attached to the rocks?" Will asked.

"Apparently there's something covering her body," Jack explained, "some sort of varnish, lacquer, they're not sure but it's hard and its waterproof and, whatever it is, it's sealing her to the rocks."

"He did it all underwater?" Zeller asked, sounding as disbelieving as he looked, "Are there even any completely transparent underwater sealants?"

"Polyeurathane," Beverly suggested, hands on her hips, "you can get a clear finish with it. Comes cheap at home depot, anyone could have it in their garage. Only I don't know if it would go *this* clear."

"Some epoxies too," Will chipped in, "could be a resin."

Once the crane arrived and the body was on land, the corpse was no longer as pristine as it had been on their arrival. Whatever the sealant was it had cracked open with the unsophisticated movements of the crane, pulling skin with it to open up the red flesh beneath. Will thought she looked like a withered toffee apple by the time she was lowered, dripping water, onto a large tarpaulin the team they'd brought had set out on the rocky beach; nothing compared to the underwater siren she'd been minutes before.

"So much for getting a print off of that," Price said, disappointed, as he viewed the vast spider web of cracks covering her body.

"Come on people," Jack said loudly, clapping his hands, "clear the scene!"

Will heard them trudging away across the shingle. He jumped when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, turning fitfully to look at Jack. The man's stare was for a thousand yards.

"Get this done," was all he said.

Will didn't react or reply. He waited until Jack had joined the others up by the cluster of SUV's and vans on the road before looking down on the corpse one more time. He moved back, stumbling a couple of times on the uneven beach, until he felt he had enough of a view.

He closed his eyes. He evened out his breathing, as much as he could. Re-opening his eyes to a cool, dark night was as natural as breathing; *seeing*.

One swing: the tarpaulin, the diving equipment and the crime scene collection paraphernalia disappeared. Two swings: the body disappeared. Three swings: he looked down and saw her there.

I painted her skin because, beneath the moonlight, she shines like lacquered marble. A preservation for as long as she is left alone. Only she won't be. He smiled softly down at her, laying upon the stones, her face serene in its antipathy. He had left her hair free of the perfect, translucent prison because in the water he knew it would move like seaweed.

Soon they will be here to tamper, ruin, destroy. The beautiful is so fleeting. Twilit.

He carried her to the water's edge on a plank of wood on which she had been laid to keep the body straight. She was stiff, unmoving. He placed his bag of essentials down on the stones and carried her into the water on the board. She floated perfectly. He tied the ballasts to the wood and watched as she dipped below the water with every weight attached.

"Just like a burial at sea," he turned to see black antlers in his vision, the voice drawling.

"She'll be beautiful forever," Will said in reply, watching the moonlit water as seen through ebony.

"*Not forever,"* the stag replied, eyes closed, "*nothing lasts forever, Will."*

When he came to he was standing in front of the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane, the loud ringing of sirens in his ears. Will stumbled, sucking in a quick breath, as two EMTs rushed past him with a gurney between them, extending the wheels once they reached the bottom of the stairs.

His hands met the rough stone of the small wall lining the stairs, scraping. He hissed, disoriented. *Jesus*, Will thought as he managed to sit down on the stairs without falling, clutching at his torso, *not again, not again*.

"This is unacceptable!" Jack stood in the driveway shouting at an angry young orderly dressed in white, "Lawrence Wells was a key witness in an ongoing investigation. He was under the care of your facility!"

"I'm sorry agent Crawford, but we've been in a bit of disarray ourselves what with Mr. Chilton being absent," the orderly said, a slight twang to his voice; he sounded almost bored next to Jack's raging temper, "Mr. Wells was secure in our infirmary, he'd complained of chest pains. It was just a check up. We don't know how this could have happened."

"Then you better hope he makes it," Jack said, "because without him..."

The phone in his pocket started to ring. Will unwound himself long enough to grab it, pushing it to his ear.

"Graham," he said, strained.

"The truck, Will, you were right," Beverly, she sounded excited.

“What?” he asked, frowning.

“About the truck,” she said, sounding slightly confused, “the serial numbers.”

“Just walk me through it,” Will said; it was torture to not know how his own mind had worked, to be forced to face the blanks.

“Well ok,” she said, “we checked up on the serial numbers on the tow truck at Thomson’s garage. Turns out the serial numbers were all filed off like you thought, nearly every single one. This isn’t the same truck as Frank Thomas has in his paperwork, neither the one that was written off or the other he told you he still owned. It’s new, brand new.”

“How can you tell?” Will asked.

“I’ve been around cars before,” she said, “my first boyfriend was a mechanic, Will. There isn’t an engine on earth that’s been running for three years and looks like *that*. My bet is your bet. The Ripper has the second truck, it’s how he’s been able to transport all of these bodies without being seen. And hell, it’s a perfect cover. I mean who takes a second glance at a tow truck, morning, noon or night?”

“Yeah,” Will nodded, catching up, “*yeah*. That’s great, that’s really great. Do I need to put out an APB?”

“Way ahead of you partner,” he could hear the smile in her voice.

“Thanks Beverly.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“I meant for believing in me.”

“Hey, don’t get all mushy on me now,” definitely smiling, he could imagine her.

“Ha,” Will laughed but it sounded pained, “what about Frank Thomas and his son, are they in for questioning?”

“Umm, Frank Thomas is still missing since the hour and a half ago that I told you he was,” she said, making Will berate himself for asking, “and I told you about, who was it you said? Harold Thomas?”

“Right, his son,” Will said impatiently.

“Frank Thomas doesn’t have another son, Will,” Beverly said with the voice of someone reiterating a painful fact, “no one at the garage has heard of anyone called Harold. They didn’t recognise the description you gave. Frank Thomas’s only son Benny died in a car accident four months ago, it’s how the other truck got totalled. Will?”

“Right,” he said, voice squeezed, “right. I hear you. I’ve got to go.”

When he looked up Jack was storming towards him, and the ambulance and orderly were gone. Will stood stiffly, his mind racing. *If you need anything, you ask me yeah? Harold Thomas*. The man had spoken to him. He had *spoken* to the man! Fuck. *Fuck*. His reality swerved and detoured. He swallowed. Can I trust my eyes? He asked. I've never been able to trust my eyes. Can I trust my ears? Sure as hell not.

"This is a god damn disaster," Jack was furious, he could see it in the way the tall man was hunched into a protective lurch, "what's left?"

"Beverly's put out an APB on the tow truck," Will hoped it wasn't something he'd already told Jack, "I was right about the serial numbers."

"Well at least that's something," Jack sighed tersely, "although I'm starting to think that truck might be at the bottom of the ocean along with Frank Thomas and Lawrence Wells when the sick fuck dies. Damn it. *Damn it!*" Jack punched his fist down against the stone wall, voice venomous, "Ripper's a slippery son of a bitch and shit but if he can't clean up after himself."

A rush of intuition and Will blanked.

'*They're clean, only they're not and I'm the only one who can still see the blood there*' : *It was spacious and clean, unlike any other basement he'd ever been into :* '*Apologies*," Hannibal said, pushing the curls from Will's sweat soaked forehead, '*perhaps we should clean up*' *: ridiculously spotless and immaculate cleaning supplies : he sat still while Hannibal cleaned his hands : "I am quite capable of cleaning up."*

No, no*, no*. The whispering, ebony lips laughed raucously.

"He's wiping the slate clean," Will said quietly, hands in his pockets, "he's going to ground even as he shows us what he's capable of."

"Why don't you try telling me something I don't know," Jack said.

"It's not like I can just walk down the street and recognise his face," Will spat, "come on Jack, we're trying here."

"Then try *harder*."

Jack drove him back to his car. The ride was tense. There was an odd note of defensiveness in the air that Will couldn't account for. Will thought about it as he blinked away the spots before his eyes, then he gave in and asked.

"You're holding back on me," Will said as they took the flyover, "what is it?"

A long pause, so long that Will thought he might have to repeat his question.

"You're so sure about the Copycat and the Ripper being the same guy," Jack said eventually.

"They are the same guy."

"You sound real sure."

“It’s because I’m right,” Will said without arrogance, “got a better theory?”

“Did you know we’ve found train tickets, purchased by Garrett Jacob Hobbs? Two tickets.”

“Don’t even...” Will kept his tone level even if it hardened without his consent.

“Same train Elsie Nichols took,” Jack cut him off, “dinner receipts for two, hotel rooms for two, all near the same campuses that his victims attended.”

“Abigail isn’t a killer Jack,” Will stood by his conviction, even as he listened to Jack come to the same conclusion as Hannibal had given to him.

“You can’t know that,” Jack said as the car slowed in traffic, “he was travelling with her. She attended orientations at *every school* where a girl was abducted by the Shrike. You can’t ignore that, not even you. She was with him when he was choosing the girls.”

“And you think that flips her?” he asked harshly, “You think that flicks a damn genetic switch in her brain and now she’s running around mutilating people?”

“She was helping him choose his victims,” Jack said solemnly.

“Or maybe she was being forced to cooperate. Maybe Abigail knew what her father was and her silence and complicity was all she could give to protect herself and her mother. Ever think of that?”

“Or maybe the connection between the Copycat and Hobbs is family. She kills Cassie Boyle to impress dad, she kills Marissa Schuur in memoriam, then she kills nick Boyle to cover her tracks.”

“Then what?” Will spat, “She slices open David Bressinden? Why?”

“He insulted you,” Jack said darkly, “and, other than Dr. Lecter, you seem as close to a replacement for her father as she has right now,” ignoring Will’s sound of disgust at the idea, “or maybe she’s trying to impress someone new.”

“The Ripper? You think she’s trying to *impress him*?”

“You said yourself you thought the Copycat was peacocking,” Jack said loudly, “couldn’t it be a possibility?”

“I also told you that there’s no distinction between the two,” Will retorted.

“And I think that’s a damn fool notion,” Jack said, refusing to be argued with.

“You’re out of your mind,” Will shook his head, “damn well blinkered. You don’t want to see it because you want her to be guilty. The Ripper is a fucking angel of death Jack, he’s killed so many more than we thought and you can’t accept that because it makes your failings all the more obvious.”

“Watch your damn mouth!” Crawford shouted.

“You want to push me till I fucking snap? You want to force me so far down the abyss I can’t claw my way back out? Fine!” Will shouted back, jamming the door open, forcing Jack to slam on the brakes, “I’ll catch the Ripper for you Jack, let him destroy me while I’m doing it, but you touch a hair on that girl’s head and you’ll be *fucking* sorry!”

“Don’t threaten me Graham,” Jack fumed as Will bundled himself out of the car, “*hey*..!”

The door slammed shut and Will stormed up the pavement, hands in his pockets, heart racing.

Abigail.

There wasn’t any room to park near Hannibal’s house so Will found a spot a few streets up. He didn’t bother to knock, just unlocked the door and walked in. He took off his shoes automatically and hung up his jacket.

He could hear music playing softly but the house was silent, still.

“Anyone home?” he asked.

No movement from upstairs. Will walked to the library and knocked before opening the door. It was dimly lit, only a few lamps spotted about, and something classical was playing. Empty other than the sounds. Tomb-like. Will closed the door and walked down the quiet corridor to the kitchen, his own shuffling feet hissing like vipers. His heart jumped in surprise when he found Hannibal standing by the counter, staring into space, large thick cleaning gloves covering his hands and forearms. The kitchen smelled heavily of bleach.

“Damn,” Will said, taking a deep breath as the man in question looked to him as if waking from a daydream, “you scared me.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, his tone mildly concerned; he could hear the beginnings of a boiling kettle and saw steam drifting from the steel spout, “I did not hear you come in.”

“We’ve got a problem,” Will said, cutting to the chase.

“Oh?”

“Jack knows. About Abigail, he knows.”

“You are certain?”

“Yeah,” Will said, nodding his head three times, “he knows. He’s got proof. He’s mad on the idea, thinks she’s the Copycat killer. Can’t see the truth for the trees.”

“I see,” Hannibal said, frowning slightly, his forehead barely creased; he looked up from his inspection of the floor, “you look tired. Let me make you some tea and we can talk.”

“That’s all you’ve got? This isn’t the time,” Will asked significantly.

“If we do not take our time, then the outcome could be dire,” Hannibal said, pulling off his gloves and setting them over the side of the sink.

“It’s already dire. It’s...” he started confidently, then: *don’t lie to him*, it whispered; he paused, staring at his feet, then his voice broke as he confessed, “I feel like I’m *coming apart*. He’s close, Hannibal, the Ripper, so close I can damn well smell him. And now here comes the wrecking ball. There’s too much to swallow at once.”

“You need to rest, you have been through heavy emotional and physical trauma in the past few days. It is no wonder the stress is overwhelming you.”

“I’m missing something,” Will said, shaking his head, “something so obvious. Something...”

“Please, Will.”

He stopped short, feeling foolish and resentful all at once. Will closed his eyes and rubbed at his face, avoiding the bruises.

“Right,” he nodded, feeling antsy, “alright. I’m sorry, I just barged in and...”

“I have said before,” Hannibal stated, walking to a cupboard to pull out a thick, white mug and an individual teapot, “never apologise for coming to me.”

Will paced around the sitting room while Hannibal finished the refreshments. The tea was sweet smelling when Hannibal brought it through on a tray and Will poured himself a cup. Hannibal went upstairs to change his clothes. As he drank his phone buzzed in his pocket. A text from Beverly.

Positive ID on first: Andrew Caldwell. Independent Medical Examiner. Missing for three weeks. Jane Doe still unidentified.
You ok? Didn’t want to say earlier but you look like crap.

Will licked his lips. He thought of Jack. Abigail swam in his mind, her smile wavering. He typed a reply.

Then frozen seems a good guess. He’s keeping them fresh. I keep thinking about the things we’re already missing. If Ripper is Copycat, who called Hobbs? Who was the man on the phone? And why was Bressinden so personal? Why leave a note?
Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.

He fidgeted near the couch as he held his phone. Another buzz. He checked it.

Let’s keep our eyes on the evidence we do have, not get lost in the things we don’t. Jane Doe – brain removed through nose. Nothing else missing so far. Putting her through an x-ray. Where did you go? Jack came back to the lab looking like you’d pissed on his couch.

Even Beverly’s humour couldn’t rouse a smile. Will thought about telling the truth but was irrationally worried she’d tell Jack. If he knew Will was here he might spook and send the team in for Abigail without hesitation.

At home, checking some things out. Don't think it's safe yet to come back to the lab. I'll keep you posted.

He sat down on the couch and held his tea, steaming. He took a sip. It was pleasant, calming, even as he found it difficult to be calm. His limbs felt jittery and he finished his mug before placing it down. There was movement upstairs and Will wondered what was taking Hannibal so long. Eventually he stood, unwilling to sit around.

The stairs seemed laborious to climb but Will ignored it. He approached Abigail's room and knocked tentatively. Then, when there was no reply, he knocked again, louder. The light was on when he opened the door but no one was there. Will frowned, walking in. He walked to her laptop, sitting open and on, showing a website on hunting trips in the Wolf Trap area. Will reached out and touched it as if it were a precious thing.

She's thinking of you, lips said, *but you can't protect her.*

Will shook his head, rubbing at his temples. He turned to leave, eyes scanning the room. They fell on the bookcase and he stopped. The part of his mind ever focused on the case ticked over. If Hannibal had bought her the classics, he thought, then maybe...

He ran his index finger along the neat spines, mostly unbroken, brand new. *Grapes of Wrath, Great Gatsby, Howl and Other Poems, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, The Iliad.* Bingo. Will slipped it out and flicked through it as he walked back to the door. What was the number of the torn page left in Bressinden's wound? He asked himself, two seven three? Probably a different edition but it would surely be in about the same...

He stopped.

Everything stopped.

The silence around him seemed to halt, becoming numb background noise. He felt his eyes blink, his left hand reaching up to touch the torn paper with disbelieving fingertips. When his chest began to ache he drew in a long breath. The single drop of rusty red beside the tear screamed at him while black lips grinned.

Abigail

No, he thought. No. *No*. You know it's not. You know what this is. You *see*.

He looks normal. No one can tell what he is.

Far worse; it is far worse, isn't it? It is made so much more horrifying that you already knew. You knew already, didn't you? All the way back in that office as you applied your profile silently and he smiled in return. You saw it and it saw you back. It's what you always tell yourself: go with your first impressions. *You're smart, Graham, quick on the draw. You see what others don't want you to. No friends to keep but a damn fine career ahead of you in looking into the dark places.*

Then what happens? You get involved. Why do you always get involved? You saw him, the black antlers in the thicket, staring out at you glassy eyed. You aimed your gun but didn't pull the trigger. Why didn't you pull? Did you see something you liked? Or did those eyes charm you into the water?

He has some of the characteristics of a sociopath, no remorse or guilt at all.

You walked and you walked with that grinning guide at your side, like Roland searching for the grail. Only it was just a fantasy, there was no grail, there's never been a grail. You constructed a dream around the physical to keep it safe. The fantasy doesn't exist. It never existed in the way you thought. All this time, *all this time*, you've been chasing a shadow and a smile.

He won't have any other marks. Won't be a drifter.

All this time, he thought as he looked up to find Hannibal standing in the open doorway watching him impassively, you've been chasing the one thing you told yourself you couldn't stand to lose.

He'll have no history of trouble with the law.

Everything stood still. They stared at each other while Will felt the seams ripping. *No, no, no.* His lips parted but he could not speak.

He'll be hard to catch.

Time seemed to pass so very slowly while neither moved. Lack of action spoke the words neither voiced. Will tightened his fingers on the pages while his eyes flitted around the room, looking for another way out. Hannibal stood directly in the centre of the door, seemingly casual but for the fact Will could see he was poised, resting on the balls of his feet.

Rush rush rush. His mind ran rampant, heavy stag's hooves running, bleating wildly as it was chased by an abomination of black fingers and grinning lips. *What is wrong with me? What's been wrong with me all this time?* Will held the book with one hand while he put his other into his pocket, pulling out what had become a familiar orange pill case. He looked at it blankly before manoeuvring it into his fingers and holding it up.

Liar, the pages of the book screamed. Hundreds of voices raised in a Greek chorus. Will could tell that he was shaking because the pills rattled in their cage.

"What are these?" he asked steadily.

"They are cortico-steroids," Hannibal answered as if he were being asked what sauce he would like on his steak, "for treating inflammation and serious infection."

"I'm not suffering from psychosis," Will said slowly, his voice tense and hard, watching Hannibal nod once, "what do I have? What didn't the doctors find?"

"You have viral encephalitis. It has caused the entire right hemisphere of your brain to swell, accounting for your auditory and visual hallucinations, mood swings, headaches, fevers."

Enough to draw him in because Will was sharp and Will was shrewd but, under it all, Will was naive in the face of affection. It stabbed at him like an envenomed fang, painful at first, untrustworthy, but over time numbing and decaying barriers built firmly to repel intruders and enemies.

Hannibal had seen his weakness at first glance, just as Will had seen Lecter's truth on first meeting before being rendered sightless by the offered hand of friendship.

"You called Garrett Jacob Hobbs from the office while I was outside putting files in the car," he said, the pieces fitting together with rapidity now that the centre of the display had been found, "didn't you."

"Yes," Hannibal said, tipping his head down and to the left, "though there is no proof of that."

"Abigail is proof. Abigail knew who you were as soon as she heard you, didn't she. Where is she Hannibal?"

"She is safe," Hannibal took a step into the room and Will took a step back, his ankle wobbling, "from Jack Crawford and his suspicions."

"How can I believe that?" Will asked, trying to struggle, "Why did I come here?" he asked himself, "I knew. I knew, didn't I. Somewhere I knew. Just not enough to believe it."

"You came here looking for sanctuary," Hannibal said, another step, keeping himself between Will and the door, "At a time when other men first see and fear their isolation, yours has become understandable to you. You are alone because you are unique."

"I'm as alone as you are," Will said, mouth tight as he tried to control his speech.

"If you followed the urges you kept down for so long," Hannibal said, "cultivated them as the inspirations they are, you would not be alone. Neither of us would."

Countless limbs and body parts, splayed out in a profusion before well shined shoes. A rude word and discourteous manner enough to spark distant fire in controlled eyes. Deep, deep seated control. Will looked up and imagined he could see a line, a blade tracing back through the flesh of countless bodies.

The man-stag smiled. It wore Hannibal 's face.

"Who is she?" Will asked, unsure why the urge to know was so sudden, "the siren in the lake?"

"Siren?" Hannibal smiled genuinely, "Ah, Will, your poetic nature flatters me. Did you think her beautiful? She was not so in life. A terribly rude individual with little to offer but crass indulgences and a lack of vision. A poisonous being. I am glad she brought a splash of wonder to the world as she left it."

"I'm not here to praise your atrocities, doctor," Will said tightly, reaching out to steady himself as he walked backwards past Abigail's desk; he bumped into the bookshelf and felt

himself waver dangerously, his head spinning. His eyes blinked rapidly as his feet refused to respond while Hannibal grew ever closer. A warning flashed up, loud and bright, “why are you admitting to all of this?”

“A pertinent question,” Hannibal said, nodding, “it is perhaps because of something I was told recently, by a trusted colleague. It is comforting to be seen by others, truly seen. Revivifying. Apparently I have issues with trust. Yet I have trusted you, Will.”

A hand at his face as Hannibal stopped before him, touching the twitching skin with a delicacy Will wished he couldn’t understand. A tenderness he wished he did not respond to. Hannibal smiled at him with a mischievous warmth, his eyes crinkling.

“Or it could be the ketomine I put in your tea,” he said, making Will’s eyes widen as he frowned, “and the fact that you will soon be unconscious and remember,” Hannibal gestured to the room at large, the book in his hand and, finally, Lecter himself, “none of this.”

This isn’t real, his mind tried to tell him, curling in on itself. He stared at Hannibal, blinking as his head began to swim. Hannibal traced a path down his face, dipping to his neck, winding around to the nape where he pulled gently. Will tipped forwards without the ability to force balance, the book dropping to the floor with a dull thunk. Oh, this is happening, Will thought blankly as he fell into Hannibal’s strong arms, this is happening then. This is...

Here, now, Will couldn’t keep his neck up straight. It landed on Hannibal’s shoulder while Lecter carried him awkwardly to the bed, sitting them both down on the edge. He held Will upright with an arm at his back and a hand on his chest. Will felt lips upon his forehead and wished, deep in a place he would not name, that the ground would swallow them both.

“Please, don’t keep up the charade, not now, not here,” Will laughed weakly as he felt his chest convulse involuntarily. He was helpless, unconsciousness sneaking up on him, and all he could do was laugh frantically, “oh god. You killed them. How many?”

“Many more than Garrett Jacob Hobbs,” Hannibal said simply.

“You’re the man on the phone,” Will felt his laugh hitch, stutter, turn to a vague sound of distress, “the respectable psychiatrist freezing bodies to cut. You didn’t have to put Boyle in the Bentley because you had the tow truck. The lacquered woman, the man in halves. Did you put Marissa Schurr in there too? How many others? Oh Christ,” Will thought as his face crumpled, “oh Jesus Christ.”

Hannibal touched his face, thumb over his bottom lip and a tip of his chin. I’m going to die, the thought struck him. The ebony lips at his ear leaned in, around, captured his mouth. Will closed his eyes and tried to move away. He felt his mouth going slack, tingling. Flashes of longing. Will fought the feelings swamping him as his mind flickered. I wish I could hate you, he thought wildly.

Hannibal leaned back, fond eyes on Will.

“None of it was real for us,” Will slurred out, rambling as his mind shut down, “but it was real. I know it was. Yet none of it was real. How are you going to kill me?”

“You are most obstinate,” Hannibal said, sounding mildly frustrated, as if speaking to a recalcitrant pupil, “you are my dear friend and I care about you very much. Perhaps more than is healthy for me. Sleep, dear Will. There is much work to be done.”

A woozy darkness overtook him. Will could not see, only hear his own breathing, overly loud, in his ears. There was a sensation of falling, hitting something soft.

Leaving Jack Crawford's warm car, angry and agitated, on a busy Baltimore street in the late afternoon, would be the last thing Will Graham would remember for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

This is not the end. There will be a short epilogue to round up this story but there will also be another story to follow. As if I could leave Will in this predicament and not at least allow him a chance at his own back.

Thank you again SO MUCH to all of your support. Honestly, it made writing this story all the more fun knowing there were people out there enjoying it :)

Also, for the Clozapine/Cortico-steroid switch, I looked into it and viral encephalitis can be treated with cortico-steroids. I have an auto immune disease and have, at times, been on high doses of cortico-steroids. They are a wonder drug, honestly. It's amazing the difference they make and how fast they make it. They help regulate the inflammation levels in the blood but don't cure the problem. They're symptom solvers.
So, as Will reduces the dose, the infection takes hold again and Hannibal is allowed the delight of watching Will deal with his descent into madness, with an added bonus of being placed on a pedestal as the man who helped save him from himself. In 'Démarreur', when Will skips his dose so he can have dinner with Alana, he also drinks a lot of alcohol which would exacerbate the encephalitis, thus why the reaction was so strong.
With his prescription being 'delivered' Hannibal could put anything in the pill case before handing it over. Will is so trusting sometimes, and Hannibal is a terrible, terrible man.
Not a good mix. Not at all.

Also, also: if anyone is interested in the effects of ingesting chloroform, here's the document I used. Interesting (if somewhat horrifying) read.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/338529/Chloroform_info_incid_mgment_tox.pdf

Entremet

Chapter Summary

Title Translation:
'Entremet' - 'A small, usually sweet, dish served between courses'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fredericka Lounds' day started like any other. She awoke with her alarm at eight thirty, a flapping hand stopping the incessant beeps. She stalked to the kitchen, waking slowly as she went, and flicked on the coffee maker. Then she put on her shower cap (not a hair day), showered, brushed her teeth, dressed and put on her make up. Then she opened her laptop, signed in, and went to make herself a hefty cup of caffeine.

The headlines were dull. Nothing major that she hadn't already investigated, just bankers and foreign wars. Dull, dull and more dull.

She sipped her drink, flicking through her usual haunts. Her phone sat beside her and she brushed her finger up and down the surface, checking her emails. Five hundred and fifty six new posts to *Tattlecrime.com* since the night before. That story on Gideon had really boosted. Regardless if the guy had been the Chesapeake Ripper or not, everyone loved a comeback kid, Freddie thought with a grim smile. Now, with the Ripper doling out bodies like hot cakes, Freddie wouldn't be surprised if the next article she had planned, '*The Gemini and the Water Bearer: Two kills in One for Chesapeake Ripper',* overloaded the server.

She sorted through the comments and posts as the caffeine finally reached her brain, switching it on. The usual fare: some people hyping up the gore, some people calling her out for sensationalising, a couple of fly-by-night shrinks (she could tell from their pretentious word choice) commenting on whether or not Gideon was the Ripper, two guys disagreeing on the origins of the Columbian necktie which, when she scrolled down, had turned into a screed war of people picking sides, agreeing, disagreeing, or just adding inflammatory remarks to fuel the flames. Freddie laughed at a couple of the more creative insults as she drank.

It was a usual morning, a mundane, usual morning. She clicked on an aberrant post, something on an archived article from a couple of years back now. Normally she wouldn't have bothered but she didn't have much planned and inspiration could come in the oddest of places, she found. She looked at the old article it brought up: *'A Gruesome Find for FBI Crawford and the BAU'* (God I was crap at headlines back then, Freddie thought derisively). She remembered it as she scrolled down; Miriam Lass, the arm, bla bla. She guessed people had been linked back to it through Gideon's choice of location for Chilton's kidnapping.

Lass's arm had been found at the observatory, she remembered the photographs. She skipped down the page automatically to find the comment, sitting at the bottom of the heap.

She frowned, taking another drink of her coffee. Then she sat up, putting her coffee down on the table. She leaned forwards a little, almost unconsciously, and grabbed a stray pen and the nearest bit of paper, an envelope, from the end of the table. She scribbled down the note hastily before getting up, grabbing her bag (already prepared the night before) and leaving, locking her door.

Jack Crawford hated the second day. The day of the find was all activity, all new clues and new discoveries, all finding pathways and getting keyed up for the fight. The second day always paled in comparison, highlighted all the things you didn't know. The second day, Jack thought, always laughed in your face.

"I understand," Jack said, holding the phone to his ear, "yes. I know. Look, if we wait any longer we're only giving her the chance to skip town. Uh huh. I do, I have my people ready and waiting. Alright."

On *this* second day, however, Jack knew he was waiting for another first. Or, more specifically, a third and fourth. To him, at that moment, Will Graham may have been nothing more than a touchy, reclusive, fucked up, aggressive, not-quite-right-in-the-head mess, but the man knew what he was talking about. If Will said the Ripper would do four in two days, then Jack would wait for the second pair while they continued examining the first.

He called in to the lab on the way to the parking lot. Beverly put him on speaker.

"Nothing from the bus?" he asked.

"Not nothing," Price said, his voice slightly echoing, "too much. I've got dozens of prints but I'd put one hundred down on them all being accounted for."

"And most probably under fifteen years old," Beverly chipped in, "it goes same for fibres, hair, anything else you can think of. He probably picked the bus because it was public, he knew there would be too much evidence to sift through; just like he picked Jane Doe's dumping spot because he knew there would be none left."

"All washed away," Zeller said; a sound of paper shuffling, "and not even anything stuck in the resin. I thought maybe some fibres or...something."

"No fibres," Beverly seconded, "not even a nose hair."

"Any luck with her prints?" Jack asked, aimed at Price.

"No," he said, "she's not in any of our databases."

"Ok, then I want her face out there," Jack said, "someone will recognise her. If Caldwell's been gone from the flow for three weeks you can bet she has too. Someone is missing her

somewhere. The sooner we know who she is, the sooner we can see the links."

Not that he thought there would be any. Hadn't been any between his victims before, why would the Ripper start now? Jack thought as a message came in. '*All ready*' it said as he walked into the parking lot. Agent Conrad was already in the SUV. Crawford took his place in the passenger seat.

He hoped Dr. Lecter didn't oppose the house call. Jack really wasn't in the mood to fight with another friend.

She should have been wary about taking addresses from strangers, especially now, after Gideon. She should have been, sure, only Freddie never was what she should be. Curiosity killed the cat, she thought as she stepped out of her car, *but* satisfaction brought it back. Freddie always liked to focus on the satisfaction available in any venture. Otherwise, she thought as she looked up at the warehouse, what was the point?

Still, no reason not to be cautious. Freddie unclipped her handbag, pulling her small revolver up to the open mouth. Easy to grab. She shook out her hair and brought her camera out from the pocket of her maroon leather jacket. The wind carried the smell of the sea. They were close to the docks but not close enough to hear the gulls.

She looked left and right and found no one. Shrugging off the isolation, she walked forwards on confident feet. The door creaked as she pushed it; unlocked.

Dust motes and the musty smell of rust sat in the air. It wasn't dark but it wasn't light; gloomy, she thought. The door closed slowly as she entered; no rooms, no entryway, just a vast box peppered with small windows along the high walls. Shafts of light stabbed through the air.

And there, in the middle of the box, sat something still, statuesque and horrific. Suddenly the warehouse morphed from an empty box into mausoleum.

Freddie checked the corners. Nothing. She listened for footsteps, hands, breath. Nothing. After a few more seconds she rushed forwards, shoes clicking, camera pulled up. Contorted limbs, joined by twines of red rope. Two people, or what were once people, kneeling upon the floor. They sat facing away from each other, legs bent outwards and joined at each other's ankles, arms pulled behind them and tied to each other at the wrists, creating a visceral diamond upon the floor. Heads fell down against chests as if praying.

Another payday, she thought as she readied the camera. She wondered briefly who they were. Poor sods. Still, no use their deaths being in vain. Might as well get some use out of her mad admirer's work.

The camera flashed and a shot was captured upon the screen, corpse flesh white under the bright light. She took another angle, then another. It was on the fourth photograph, leaning in

to peer at what sat between them on the floor, that Freddie realised there might be more bodies than just the two in front of her.

Beverly Katz loved the smell of warm almond tart. She held it beneath her nose and inhaled. Comfort and indulgence. Two things she needed so desperately delivered wrapped up in a in small, white box.

“I was passing,” Nigel lied with a smile, as he stood in the foyer; Beverly rolled her eyes and ran her hand down his arm.

“Then maybe you should be ‘just passing’ more often,” she said.

She ate alone in the cafeteria. The tart was moist and perfect, just like everything Nigel cooked. The other side of the table was noticeably empty. She thought of bruises and troubled eyes. Beverly wished Will was sitting across from her, staring into his coffee, so she could offer him a piece of indulgent comfort.

No more developments yet, no hair/fibre/body fluids. Ripper’s living up to his reputation. Sure you’re not surprised.
Are you going to tell me what’s going on? If you don’t get back to this one then I’ll be officially worried.

It was the fourth text she’d sent that morning alone. Still no reply.

The bodies were still there when she returned to the lab. Brian gave her a ‘hey, how was Nigel?’ and she replied with ‘still trying to get me to compliment his pastry’ to which Jimmy said ‘why doesn’t he ever make us anything? I’m good at compliments’. She knew what it was. Filler to cover the cracks. They were all trying to ignore the shadow of the missing man in the room, leaning in the corner with a dark expression full of sharp eyes and crossed arms and a head full of murder.

It’s only been one day, she tried to tell herself; but the truth was more than that, she knew it. If she faced up to reality, Will had been missing from them for a lot longer than one day.

The phone rang. Brian answered it.

“No, he’s not here but I’ll take it,” he said, sorting equipment on the table, “Yeah, put them through.”

Beverly watched him as he put his hand to his forehead and rubbed at the skin by his eye. Something was up. He covered the receiver.

“You won’t believe who I’ve got on here,” he said, eyes disbelieving.

“Do we know who they are?”

Jack Crawford stormed past Freddie Lounds as she had her statement taken by a local cop, not sparing her a glance even as she opened her mouth and held her hand up to catch his attention. He had been to Lecter’s household only to be greeted with bad news. Abigail Hobbs had run, if Hannibal was to be believed and Jack had no reason to doubt him. Distressed at what had happened to Will and also Alana, as well as not settling in to her new home, Lecter said he had woken to find her and her dearest possessions gone.

Now he had more good news, he thought facetiously. The Ripper had delivered just as Graham had ordered. Two more fresh bodies for the morgue.

“I need Graham in here,” he said, irritated, “he won’t pick up the phone to me. Anyone else have any luck?”

He was stopped with a look. Crawford wasn’t sure the last time he’d seen Beverly Katz look pityingly at him. In fact, now that he thought about it, he didn’t think he’d ever seen her do so at all. Zeller and Price hovered in the background.

“What is it? What do we have?”

“I’m sorry Jack,” she said, hands holding her camera in front of her.

Hesitation wasn’t in his nature, but he did it then. He approached the bodies, looking down. A human pretzel, he thought angrily, they’d seen worse. What was the problem? Leaning in showed him a perfect circle of dry red between their pale buttocks and, at the centre, a wallet lying open. Jack stared at it.

“Gloves,” he demanded tightly.

It was picked up with delicacy and, as it grew closer, revealed what he did not want to see. Will Graham took a good picture, considering the man couldn’t stand to look anyone in the eyes. Jack looked at Graham’s F.B.I. identification until he knew it was what he thought it was.

“Has anyone been able to reach him?” he asked.

“No,” Beverly said, Zeller and Price shook their heads, “not since last night. I thought he was, well, you know...being Will.”

“Get me...” Jack faltered.

Miriam Lass’s determined face stared back at him from behind Beverly’s shoulder, just for an instant. Blonde hair pulled back tightly, eyes cool and focused. He blinked and it was gone. It bit at him, and Jack Crawford did not like to be bit at.

How many pawns are you willing to sacrifice? That’s what the severed arm had asked him. That’s what the ID in his hand asked him now.

“I want that blood tested,” Jack said, pointing to the unmistakable substance upon which the wallet had been resting; he already knew it would come back positive as Will’s blood, but he needed to see it with his own eyes before he utterly condemned himself.

A circle, Jack thought as he continued to order his team to their duties, watching them with blank eyes, a perfect circle of red blood. Full circle; was that what the Ripper wanted to say? Since Jack had started his hunt they’d come full circle and the Ripper had claimed more bodies than Jack was sure had passed through their morgue while they, well...they had been left with nothing.

No evidence. No motive. No ties between the victims.

No Miriam.

Now no Will.

Going to give up on him too? Jack thought bitterly, Are you?

All he had was that thought to cling to as the cameras flashed and he held Will Graham’s staring face in the palm of his hand. He closed his fingers tightly.

Funny things, knots. Lots of lines converge in a knot; and not just converge, they tangle. It was difficult to separate them, unless of course you knew how. Loosing, pulling out loops, taking one strand away from another until they lay straight and dull. Life was a great big knot, he’d always thought. A great, big, ordered mess where everyone became tangled together.

Big and small, simple and mind twistingly complex. Many different uses for many different situations, materials and professions. Knots for sailors, knots for fishermen, knots for hobby, knots for hands and feet.

“Where’m I?” he managed to stumble out, words slurring as he once more tested his tight bonds with weak limbs.

A rustle of fabric as someone walked past his blindfolded eyes, “Wh-who ar'you? Hey...*say something*.”

Knots held the world together, Will Graham thought as he felt the needle enter the vein in his arm by way of silent hands, unable to do much more than exhale and flop his head to the left, Even if sometimes the world wished they didn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry in advance for the cliffhanger (it is cruel, I know). I hope to have the first chapter of the next story up in the next couple of weeks so I promise not to keep Damocles' sword dangling for too long!

Thanks again to all you wonderful readers. You make my day :)

See you all on the flip side.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!